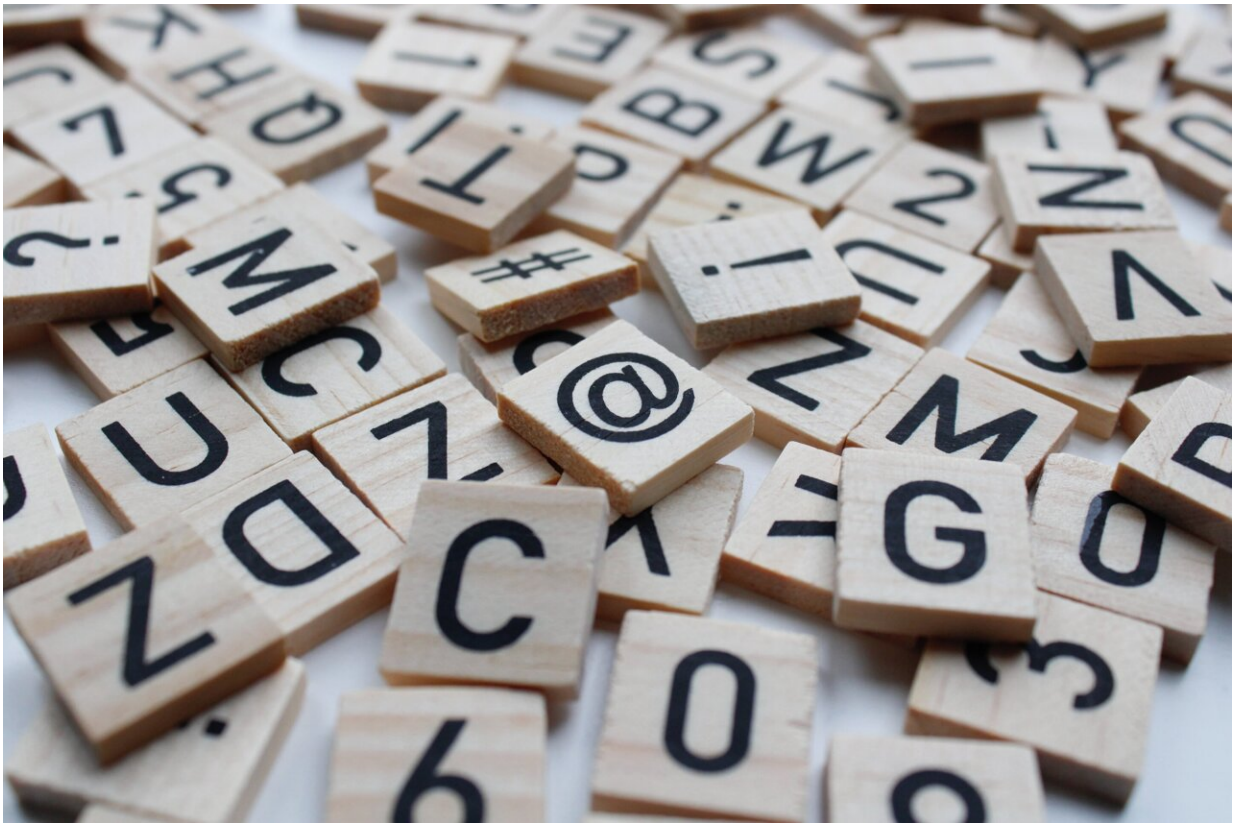


Which is easier to remember, symbols or words?

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Everyday symbols like &?!#@\$ are highly memorable, according to new research.

The new study led by the University of Waterloo aimed to investigate how well [symbols](#) are remembered compared to words with the same [meaning](#). The research is published in the journal *Cognition*.

"Our work is ground-breaking as it highlights how humans remember graphic symbols and logos," said Myra Fernandes, co-author and professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at Waterloo. "Symbols are particularly useful as they can be used as logos in advertising, as well as offer a faster means of communication through emojis. Our studies examining memory for symbols offer insight into ways to maximize retention and refine communication."

Across five studies, the researchers surveyed over 1,100 adults to examine the role of symbols in memory. In the studies, participants were presented with either a symbol or its word counterpart, e.g., '\$' or 'dollar,' and tested on how many symbols or words they could remember.

In all studies, the researchers found that participants were able to memorize symbols better than words with the same meaning.

"Symbols might be more easily remembered because they give concrete visuals to [abstract ideas](#)," said Brady Roberts, lead author and Ph.D. candidate in Cognitive Neuroscience. "When we think about [abstract concepts](#), like love, it can be difficult to visualize clearly. But with symbols, we can use a sort of image that represents the concept—like a heart for love—which makes the abstract idea more concrete and therefore easier to remember."

Roberts adds that symbols may also be easier to remember because they are unique and tend to represent a single concept, whereas words can have multiple meanings. Consider the play symbol [▷]. It only has one meaning: to start a piece of media. But its word counterpart 'play' has many other meanings, such as a game or theatrical performance, and

there are many synonyms for the word, such as commence, begin, and start.

The authors hope that their work will aid in the future of visual design to help plainly communicate complicated or abstract ideas.

More information: Brady R.T. Roberts et al, Symbol superiority: Why \$ is better remembered than 'dollar', *Cognition* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2023.105435](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2023.105435)

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