

The science of why you can remember song lyrics from years ago

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Why is it that many people can't remember where they put their car keys most mornings, but can sing along to every lyric of a song they haven't heard in years when it comes on the radio? Do song lyrics live in some sort of privileged place in our memories?

Music has a long history of being used as a mnemonic device, that is, to aid the memory of words and information. Before the advent of written language, [music](#) was used to [orally transmit stories and information](#). We see many such examples even today, in how we teach children the alphabet, numbers, or—in my own case—the names of the [50 states](#) of the U.S. Indeed, I'd challenge even any adult reader to try and recall the letters of the alphabet without hearing the familiar tune or its rhythm in your mind.

There are several reasons why music and words seem to become intricately linked in memory. First, the [features of music](#) often serve as a predictable "scaffold" for helping us to remember associated lyrics.

For instance, the rhythm and beat of the music give clues as to how long the next word in a sequence will be. This helps to limit the possible word choices to be recalled, for instance, by signaling that a three-syllable word fits with a particular rhythm within the song.

A song's melody can also help to segment a text into meaningful chunks. This allows us to essentially remember longer segments of information than if we had to memorize every single word individually. Songs also often make use of literary devices like rhyme and alliteration, which [further facilitate memorization](#).

Sing it

When we have sung or heard a song many times before, this song may become accessible via our implicit (non-conscious) memory. Singing the lyrics to a very well-known song is a form of [procedural](#) memory. That is, it is a highly automatized process like riding a bike: it's something we are able to do without thinking much about it.

One of the reasons music is so deeply ingrained in memory in this way is

because we tend to hear the same songs many, many times throughout our lifetimes (more so, than say, reading a favorite book or watching a favorite film).

Music is also fundamentally emotional. Indeed, research has shown that one of the main reasons people engage with music is because of the diversity of emotions it conveys and evokes.

A wide range of research has found that emotional stimuli are remembered better than non-emotional ones. The task of trying to remember the ABCs or a [the colors of the rainbow?](#) is inherently more motivating when set to a catchy tune—and we can remember this material better later on when we make an emotional connection.

Music and lyrics

It should be noted that not all previous [research](#) has found that music facilitates [memory](#) for associated lyrics. For instance, upon the first encounter with a new song, memorizing both the melody and associated lyrics is [harder than memorizing just the lyrics](#). This makes sense, given the multiple tasks involved.

However, after getting over this initial hurdle and being exposed to a song several times, more beneficial effects seem to kick in. Once a melody is familiar, the associated lyrics are generally [easier to remember](#) than if you tried to memorize these lyrics without a tune behind them.

Research in this area is also being applied to assist people with various neurodegenerative disorders. For instance, music seems to help those with [Alzheimer's disease](#) and [multiple sclerosis](#) to remember verbal information.

So, the next time you put your car keys in a new spot, try creating a

catchy [song](#) to remind you of their location the next day—and, in theory, you shouldn't forget where you've put them so easily.

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