

Reading and Use of English

Part 5

1 Read the exam task instructions and the title. Answer these questions.

- 1 What is the writer worried about?
- 2 What do you expect a scientist to say about this topic?

2 Now do the exam task.

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Getting facts from the internet: does it ruin your memory?

Do you ever use an encyclopaedia? It's unlikely that anyone nowadays will answer 'yes' to this question, since internet search engines have made them almost completely redundant as a means of finding out about the world. If you want to educate yourself about anything from when steam engines were invented to what an aardvark is, you ask the internet. But once you have the answers (1698 and an African mammal), do you remember these facts? And does it matter if you don't? After all, you can always just ask the internet again.

Because it's my birthday soon, the aging process has been on my mind recently, and I've become very aware of how often I reach for my phone to find a fact that I know but cannot recall: that film star's name, the year the Russians first went into space, and so on. This has made me start to wonder if I rely on the internet too much. Perhaps the saying 'use it or lose it' applies to memory. While getting facts from the internet is wonderfully easy and immediate, is it making my brain lazy?

I researched the topic (online of course). One interesting, and rather surprising, search result was the work of Dr Richard Carmona, a scientist from the U.S. He says it's certainly true that many people feel they can't live without their phones, a feeling that's sometimes as strong as an addiction. However, he says there's no clear evidence to suggest that reliance on the internet as a back-up memory leads to a lazy brain. In fact, he claims that the brain stays more engaged because you're providing it with so much information to process. Over time, this constant input creates more networks in the brain and they actually aid our memory.

To find out for myself, yesterday I decided not to use my phone when I couldn't recall something. I wanted to see

if my own recall improved when I stopped relying on the internet. At first, it was fine. Then a friend asked if I knew who'd directed a film. The director's name was in my memory, but it was escaping me. I fought the desire to pick up my phone, and tried to force the name into my mind. It didn't work, and I ended up feeling stressed and frustrated. Dr Carmona says these feelings are often the cost of not taking the easy internet option. I also felt I'd wasted ages trying to remember something when a search engine could have found it in seconds. While brushing my teeth before bed, I finally remembered the director's name.

So why did it take me so long to remember? Dr Carmona says that memories are saved like a series of files but some essential information like our addresses, are remembered as more important than others. These remain easier to access in the memory, as if they were on top of a stack of files. Less significant information gets stashed away at the bottom of the stack – still there, but harder to recall. If I try to remember an unimportant detail like a film director's name, I have to go a long way down the memory stack to find it. Being unable to recall it doesn't mean my brain's getting lazy.

Listening to Dr Carmona, it seems I can stop worrying, and forget about using a printed encyclopaedia rather than an electronic search engine to improve my brain power. However, one thing I did enjoy when I was doing without internet searches was the joy I felt when I managed to recall something using brain power. I might have the occasional internet-free day just so I can experience a few more of those moments. And as more birthdays pass, I ought perhaps to take Dr Carmona's advice on other ways of keeping the brain healthy, such as sleeping well, and getting enough exercise.

Exam task

You are going to read an article about relying on the internet and the effect of that on memory. For questions 1–6, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text.

- 1 In the first paragraph, what does the writer say about encyclopaedias?
A They were an effective means of learning.
B They contained an incredibly broad range of information.
C They can still help people memorise facts.
D They have lost their usefulness.
- 2 What has the writer noticed recently?
A the value of expanding her memory in certain areas
B the need to start working on maintaining a good memory
C the frequency of gaps in her memory
D the importance of trusting her own memory
- 3 Dr Carmona says that getting information from the internet
A keeps the brain stimulated.
B weakens your long-term memory.
C increases dependence on phones.
D improves the ability to select relevant information.
- 4 In the fourth paragraph, the writer explains
A one reason she disagrees with Dr Carmona.
B how changing a habit was surprisingly simple.
C the advantages of relying on your memory alone.
D how she struggled with an experiment.
- 5 What does *stashed away* mean in line 50?
A displayed before use
B kept in a favourable position
C lost and never found
D stored in a hidden place
- 6 In the final paragraph, the writer says she has found out that
A it would be difficult to follow all Dr Carmona's recommendations.
B the experience of keeping off the internet is worth repeating.
C finding information in print is hard work but can be fun.
D it is not necessary to do anything differently because of her age.