MYTH BUSTERS

Myth: Details aren’t important; what matters most is truly understanding concepts and principles.

Reality check: WRONG! Details are important, but all details are not equally important in every context – that’s the trick. You need to understand concepts and general principles to make sense of and apply the details. It’s the details that make the difference between a right and a wrong diagnosis.

There are two types of students – those who like details and those who don’t, but in medical school both types may struggle with remembering details. Why? Volume.

Detail-oriented people dive in headfirst and focus their attention on committing all the details to memory, often at the expense of understanding the “big picture.” In many contexts, this serves them well, but in medical school, the sheer volume of information that must be committed to memory may be overwhelming and unmanageable. As a detail-oriented student, you may find that your normal study routine of systematically and methodically going through the information from beginning to end, has you simply running out of time before you’ve memorized it all.

What should detail-oriented people do?

If you derive pleasure from learning the specifics – facts and data – you need to make an extra effort to give the information meaning and to look for patterns. Take a step back and look for the underlying structure of what you’re learning, i.e., how the information is organized. Try the SQR3 study method (http://www.studygs.net/texred2.htm). Chunk and categorize information to decrease the load on your short-term memory. Take some time to think about the information and to make meaningful associations in your long-term memory, which will aid in recall and help you think through test questions even if you can’t recall the specifics.

Big-picture thinkers tend to intensely dislike “the details”; what matters most to them are meaning, interconnectedness, and underlying patterns. As a big-picture thinker, you may find yourself “zoning-out” when a lecture or a reading assignment focuses on the specifics. You may have latched onto the notion that as long as you understand the concepts, you’ll do fine. You may have found yourself thinking after an exam that the questions were “nit-picky” and tested your knowledge of useless facts/trivia.

What should big-picture thinkers do?

Be mindful of details and allocate the appropriate amount of time to memorizing them. Your “big picture” thinking is of great value in coming up with ways to chunk and categorize the information to make it more manageable. Your big challenge is getting over your aversion to memorizing facts and data – sometimes it’s necessary (http://www.studygs.net/memory/). While studying, pay attention to when you get fidgety, frustrated, or sleepy, or when you start flipping pages looking for something interesting. These may be clues that the material is very detail-oriented. Rather than skipping, skimming, or flying through the material, this is your signal to slow down and spend more, not less, time.