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In this section, we turn our attention from how we experience the present to how we experience the past.

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Someone once said that “Everything in life is memory, except for thin edge of the present”.

I agree wholeheartedly with the statement. It is easy for me to make the case that all psychologists are in large part memory researchers. Those who claim that they are not either have not thought hard enough about their subject or they are not actually psychologists. For those who study objects that do not have the capacity of memory, are probably studying rocks.

Those of you who have witnessed the effects of late stage Alzheimer’s Disease on a loved one, I am sure would agree. When you take memory out of the equation, the person is not really the person anymore.

Before moving too far along, however, we need a working definition of memory to guide our discussions.

Memory is the acquisition, representation, and retrieval of information.

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Almost everyone would accept this definition of memory. Indeed it allows for a lot of wiggle room.

However, we will explore memory in the context of more specific set of assumptions, namely those provided by what Murdoch referred to as the modal model.

Why is it called the Modal Model?

You all recall from stats that there are several measures of the central tendency in your observations: the mean, median, and the mode.

The mode is simply the most common observation.

The modal model is the common way of thinking about memory.

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The modal model has a long history, going back at least to the work of James, but it was concretely described in a series of articles by Atkinson & Shiffrin in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to the modal model, memory consists of set of memory structures and control processes.

The memory structures are invariant properties of memory. There are three of them.

Sensory Memory holds all incoming information for seconds or fractions of seconds

Short-term Memory (STM) has a limited capacity, and holds information for 15-30 seconds

Long-term Memory (LTM) holds a large amount of information perhaps permanently

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Control Processes influence how information is used. There are a wide variety of control processes. In fact, there may be as many types of control processes as there are tasks. Some of the more common ones that we consider in memory research are:

• Rehearsal: repetition of an phone number in one’s head

• Mental Rotation, which you experience in one of your CogLab assignments

• Sentence Creation: to enhance memory when studying a list of words

• Etc.

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According to the modal model, information interacts with control process to flow through the memory structures in order for us to perform certain tasks or meet goals.

Information from the outside word initially resides in a sensory memory structure for a very short period of time.

Some of that information is selected for additional processing, and it enters STM, where it remains as long as it is the focus of attention.

Rehearsal is one way to keep to an item in mind.

However, there are a variety of other things that one may do with that information in order to keep it in mind or memorize it for future use. For instance, one might associate an email address with a name or a face.

At some point in the distant future, we may call upon our long-term memory to retrieve that email, perhaps to set up a hot date or order a pizza.

Over the next several lectures we look more closely at memory using the basic framework of the modal model in order to better understand the craziness that we experience in everyday life.