Flash Cards In Psychology

As students, nearly all of us have had some experience using flash cards. For one purpose or another, most of us were first introduced to flash cards in elementary school. I can recall simple arithmetic flash cards that my second-grade teacher used. There was a simple problem on one side (8 + 3) and the answer (11) on the other side. Over and over she drilled us on simple addition and subtraction problems. My other clear recollection of flash cards is of those I made for myself as I struggled with French vocabulary in high school. Do you have any memories of having used flash cards?

What I am proposing here is that this (very “low tech”) method can be useful in learning many of the terms and concepts of general psychology. College students sometimes feel that flash cards are too elementary to be truly helpful. And I agree that there are many learning situations for which flash cards may not be advisable. For learning basic vocabulary and for memorizing basic ideas and facts, however, flash cards have much to recommend them. Here I will do three things: (1) I’ll explain why—or how—flash cards can be useful, (2) I’ll provide some guidelines for making and using flash cards, and (3) I’ll provide a sample of a few flash cards for each of the first five chapters of General Psychology with Spotlights on Diversity, just to get you started. I am reluctant to provide too many, because the process of making flash cards can be as much of a learning experience as using them.

The Nature and Advantages of Flash Cards

Flash cards are simple cards—3x5 inch index cards work very well—which are used to rehearse associative learning. Whenever you have two pieces of information, say a term and its definition, and you are required to learn to associate one with the other, you will find flash cards useful. One piece of information (the term) is written on one side of the card and the associated information (the definition) is written on the other side.

Flash cards help you learn basic facts and vocabulary. It is important for you to realize that learning about psychology and preparing for exams involves more than just memorizing facts and the definitions of terms. Good exams will also test on conceptual understanding, relationships, the “big picture,” and the application of facts. (This is why we ask, “Before You Go On” questions throughout the text and why we’ve provided “Practice Tests” in this study guide.). What flash cards can do is ensure that you know the foundations for the higher level thinking that will be required on exams.

Flash cards have several advantages, most of which are quite self-evident:
1. They are portable. When carrying your textbook or your notebook is not convenient, you can always find a place for a few 3x5 index cards.
2. They help you practice retrieval skills. Exams require that you locate and retrieve information that you have stored in your memory. Yes, you do have to get that information into memory—which is what learning is all about. But on an exam, you will also have to get that information out of memory storage—which is what retrieval is all about. By using flash cards, you not only will be learning new information, you will be practicing retrieval as well.
3. Flash cards help to inform you about what you know and where trouble spots may be. Self-testing with flash cards can help you avoid surprises at exam time.

Making and Using Flash Cards

On the face of it, making useful flash cards should be a simple matter, and it is. There are, however, a few guidelines that you might want to keep in mind.
1. Place only one concept, term, or phrase on each card. Index cards are relatively inexpensive, and it defeats the purpose of the cards to overload them.
2. At the same time, use only one card for each term, concept, or phrase. If you need more than one card to describe a concept or define a term, you’re probably dealing with the sort of information for which flash cards are unsuitable.
3. You have to be careful with technical terminology, but whenever possible, use your own words. Remember, these cards are to help you—to provide you with cues for retrieving information from your own memory.

4. Be creative. Cards easily can accommodate simple drawings, pictures, diagrams, flow charts, and the like, just as easily as they can accommodate words.

5. Don't feel bound to the textbook. Flash cards can help you learn material from class as well as from the text.

6. Guard against “busy work.” Attend to what you are doing, and don’t spend a lot of time simply copying information (particularly information you already know) directly from the textbook onto cards just for the sake of making flash cards.

Procedures for using your flash cards are also reasonably self-evident. Again, however, there are a few guidelines I’d like you to keep in mind.

1. Once you have written a short pile of cards for a chapter or a topic, shuffle them. Shuffle them again each time you go through the stack. You want to learn about the concepts of general psychology no matter the order in which they appear.

2. Test yourself on both sides of each card. That is, for a vocabulary item, for example, if you were to read the definition first, could you identify the term or concept being defined?

3. After you have gone through a pile of cards a few times, begin to sort them into shorter piles. You might start with two: “I know this for sure” and “I’m totally clueless.” Obviously, a “I’m really not sure of these” pile can be useful as well. Once sorted into shorter piles, you'll know where you'll need to spend most of your flash card study time.

Please remember that the points I’ve listed here are guidelines, not hard-and-fast rules. Flash cards will help only if you make and use them. They are for you. Because there is benefit to be derived from creating flash cards as well as from using them, I’ve provided only a sample of possible cards for the first five chapters of *Psychology: An Introduction*. The rest is up to you. Good luck!

I want to acknowledge the generous help of two of my colleagues at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne. Drs. Carol Lawton and Craig Hill helped to convince me of the value of a flash card approach to study, and provided most of the hints provided here.
A Few Flash Card Possibilities for Chapter 1
(Remember: These are just suggestions. The best flash cards are those you make yourself.)

| SCIENCE                       | 1. organized body of knowledge  
|-------------------------------| 2. uses scientific methods     |
| ABCs of PSYCHOLOGY            | Affect, Behavior, Cognition; i.e., how one feels, what one does, and thinks |
| OPERATIONAL DEFINITION        | defines concepts in terms of how concept will be measured or created (e.g., intelligence = IQ test score) |
| RENÉ DESCARTES                | philosopher – explained humans without ref. to god – mind & body separate but interact (interactive dualism) |
| WILHELM WUNDT                 | Leipzig – first psych. lab (1879) – science of mind (consciousness) – structuralism |
| SAMPLE                        | a set or portion of a larger group (population) chosen for study |
| VALUE OF CORRELATION          | +1.00 (strongest positive—high w/ high)  
|                               | 0.00 (no relationship)            |
|                               | -1.00 (strongest negative—high w/ low) |
| VARIABLES in an EXPERIMENT    | manipulate INDEPENDENT variable  
|                               | measure DEPENDENT variable        |
|                               | control EXTRANEous variables       |
| RANDOM ASSIGNMENT             | making sure that every member of a population has an equal chance of being included in a sample |
| META-ANALYSIS                 | statistical combination of results of several previous studies to look for relationships between variables |