

31 WAYS TO GET SMARTER IN 2012

READ STUFF. LEARN NEW LANGUAGES. MASTER CHESS. ZONE OUT. GETTING A BIGGER BRAIN IS EASIER—AND MORE FUN—THAN YOU THINK. ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON LEE

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1. PLAY WORDS WITH FRIENDS

Alec Baldwin is onto something. Research shows word puzzles can help reduce the risk of Alzheimer's and dementia, so don't feel guilty whiling away time with the popular smartphone game. Just make sure to turn it off when you fly ...

2. EAT TURMERIC

A common spice in Indian and Thai curries, this gingerlike root contains curcumin, which may reduce the risk of dementia. Just be tidy: In India, it is also used as an orange-yellow dye.

3. TAKE TAE KWON DO

Or dance. Or play squash.

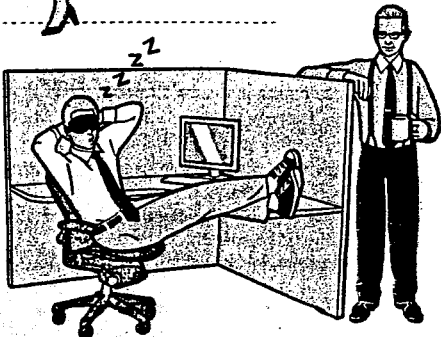
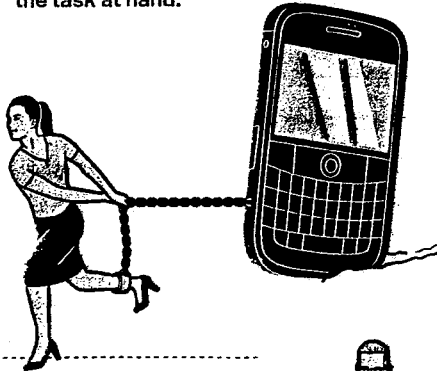
Look for an activity that raises your heart rate and requires a lot of coordination, says John J. Ratey, author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. Even homebodies should be able to find a brain-boosting sport with interactive-game technologies like Microsoft Kinect and Nintendo Wii Fit.

4. GET NEWS FROM AL JAZEERA

Don't shut yourself out from new ideas. A 2009 study found that viewers of Al Jazeera English were more open-minded than people who got their news from CNN International and BBC World.

5. TOSS YOUR SMARTPHONE

Like, in the garbage: constantly checking your email disrupts focus and saps productivity. And go offline from time to time by installing Freedom, Internet-blocking software that lets you concentrate on the task at hand.



6. SLEEP. A LOT.

Take a nap, then get to bed early. Harvard research has shown your brain continues to process memories even after you've gone to sleep, so you can recall them better later.



7. DOWNLOAD THE TED APP

The world's greatest minds gather annually at

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conferences to explore the cutting edge of issues like brain mapping and prenatal intelligence. If you can't attend, download the TED app for iOS and Android.

8. GO TO A LITERARY FESTIVAL

Are Los Angeles, Wales, and Jaipur places you've always wanted to visit? Well, they all have major annual book festivals, so buy a ticket at the right time and learn a thing or two from big-shot authors like Tom Stoppard and Jennifer Egan as you travel.

9. BUILD A 'MEMORY PALACE'

A trick for quick recall: associate the thing you want to remember with a vivid image. You may not have the patience to build a "memory palace," but at least get a sense of such techniques by reading Joshua Foer's *Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*.

10. LEARN A LANGUAGE

Mastering a second language gives a workout to your prefrontal cortex, which affects decision making and emotions. Enroll in a class, embed in deepest Sichuan province, or simply pick up Rosetta Stone software and teach yourself Latin.



11. EAT DARK CHOCOLATE

It might not boost your IQ overnight, but dark chocolate is

reported to have memory-improving flavonoids. And go ahead and pair it with a glass of red wine—another great flavonoid source.

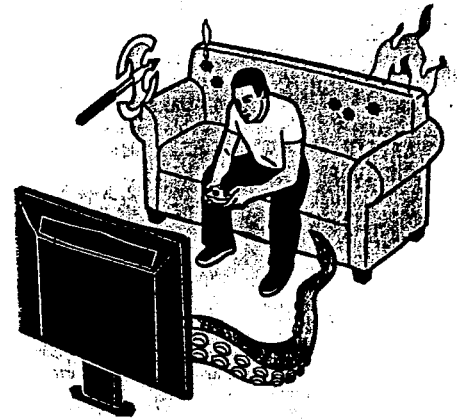
12. JOIN A KNITTING CIRCLE

Whip out the needles and make an awesome

scarf. Refining motor ability can bolster cognitive skills. Plus—it'll keep you warm this winter.

13. WIPE THE SMILE OFF YOUR FACE

Experiments have shown that the simple act of frowning makes you more skeptical and analytic in your thinking.



14. PLAY VIOLENT VIDEOGAMES

Yes, you read that right. Various studies have found that videogames quicken reactions, improve multitasking, and reduce hostile feelings after a stressful task. So check out one of this winter's hot sellers—*Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* or *Batman: Arkham Asylum*.



15. FOLLOW THESE PEOPLE ON TWITTER

Nouriel Roubini (@Nouriel): Take in his economic genius—and friend him on Facebook to see photos of his playboy lifestyle.

Jad Abumrad (@JadAbumrad): His show "Radiolab" is the smartest guide to science and philosophy on the airwaves.

Colson Whitehead (@colsonwhitehead): The acclaimed novelist is just as insightful and funny in 140 characters.

16. EAT YOGURT

Probiotics are good for your stomach, but studies on mice suggest they are good for your brain, too: mice who

ate them handled anxiety better and showed increased activity in sections of the brain handling emotions and memory.

17. INSTALL SUPERMEMO

If you want to commit something to memory, the best time to recall it is the instant before you forget it. The flashcard program SuperMemo helps you catalog that important new data—and then reminds you to remember it at that perfect moment before it slips away.



18. SEE A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

Reading the Bard has been shown to engage the brain more actively than most contemporary texts, but watching him can't hurt either. This winter, go see

Titus Andronicus in New York City or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in Washington, D.C.

19. REFINE YOUR THINKING

The brain has two distinct modes of thought, according to Daniel Kahneman, author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. System 1 is fast and automatic; System 2 is slower and more effortful. Understand these two systems, Kahneman argues, and we may be able to detect our own lazy biases and make better choices.



20. HYDRATE

Sure, every doctor and trainer tells you this, and we will too: dehydration forces

the brain to work harder and may dampen its planning ability.

21. CHECK OUT ITUNES U

Just because you don't live in Princeton doesn't mean you can't audit an Ivy League course. Top-tier schools put their lectures online at iTunes U in everything from ancient philosophy to astrophysics.



22. VISIT MOMA

Not only does it make you look smart, but viewing art has been shown to reduce

stress, letting you focus on the things that really matter. This year's must-see shows include Damien Hirst at the Tate Modern (April 4) and Cindy Sherman at MoMA (Feb. 26).

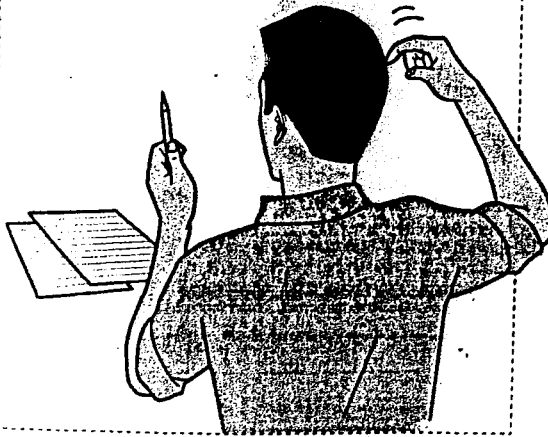
23. PLAY AN INSTRUMENT

Strum chords, tickle the ivories, play a jug. Learning an instrument boosts IQ and increases activity in parts of the brain controlling memory and coordination.

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WRITE BY HAND

Remember what that feels like? Brain scans show that handwriting engages more sections of the brain than typing. Bonus brain boost: It's easier to remember something once you've written it down on paper.



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THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE

This time-management method has nothing to do with pasta, but aims to make you productive using nothing more than a kitchen timer. Use it to help work in 25-minute blocks, taking a short break after each; the frequent rests aid mental agility.

26. ZONE OUT

Let your mind wander. A string of studies suggests that zoning out, especially when you don't consciously realize you're doing it, allows the brain to work on important "big picture" thinking.



27. DRINK COFFEE

And don't just drink one cup: women

who drank four cups of coffee a day were less likely to suffer depression than women who drank just one cup a week. Other studies have shown coffee to bolster short-term memory.

28. DELAY GRATIFICATION

Studies have found that children who were able to resist a marshmallow placed in front of them turned out, years later, to have higher SAT scores than students who snatched it up. The more successful children didn't necessarily have a natural gift for patience; they controlled their attention by focusing on something else, like singing a song.



HOW DO YOU BUFF YOUR BRAIN?

STEVEN PINKER

HARVARD PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR

"No gimmicks. If you want to get a lot out of reading, read a lot; if you want to get better at remembering errands or birthdays, practice remembering errands or birthdays. No shortcuts, no cross-training—no Sudoku."



29. BECOME AN EXPERT

Master one task you really enjoy and your brain will perform more efficiently when you do it. Chess whizzes, for example, recognize patterns more quickly than amateurs. Expertise is not innate—practice, as the old saw goes, does make perfect.

30. WRITE REVIEWS ONLINE

Anyone can be a critic on the Internet—and you should too. When you like or hate something, review it on Amazon, Yelp, whatever. Typing out your opinion will help you to better understand your own thinking.

31. GET OUT OF TOWN

Life in a big city can drive you to distraction, writes

science journalist Jonah Lehrer. Spending just a few minutes on a crowded street impairs memory and self-control, as your brain processes all the stimuli. So plan a weekend getaway; getting in touch with nature helps the brain to recover.