

REMEMBERING PEOPLE

SUPPLEMENT FOR ORGANIZING CREATIVITY (3RD ED.)

Version 0.95

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MECHANISM

When interacting with people, much depends on recognizing them, remembering what they are about, and — most importantly — remembering their name. However, depending on how many people you meet and how good your memory for faces is, that can be a challenge.

If you become known or famous enough that people remember their interaction with you, you will have a hard time remembering those interactions as well as they do. It is simply a matter of quantity.

Recognition feels automatic to many people. However, for some, including people with face blindness (prosopagnosia), it does not. They do not recognize people, even if they have interacted with them for months or years. Seeing a colleague outside the work context simply does not ring a bell. And given how awkward it is to falsely recognize a person (immediate negative reaction), compared with not recognizing a person (negative consequences long-term), it is no wonder they are highly conservative in assuming whether they know someone.

Unfortunately, the long-term consequences do happen. Not recognizing a person you should recognize can give you the reputation of being aloof, dismissive, unreliable, or socially odd. Such behavior can impede collaboration opportunities — and as reports spread, not only with this person, but with others as well.

Remembering the person and past interactions makes the interaction go more smoothly and makes it more satisfying for both.

This is a supplement to «*Organizing Creativity*» (3rd edition). It is not included in the book because it is more specific and focused, and therefore not relevant to all readers. If the topic is relevant to you, it provides additional information. It was developed with AI input.

More Information: <https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3>

APPLICABILITY

This worksheet is for people for whom one or more of the following is true:

- I cannot recognize faces.
- I recognize faces but forget names.
- I remember names but cannot place the person.
- I remember the person but forget prior interaction context.
- I meet too many people for unaided memory.
- I have a recognition limitation and need social/environmental work-arounds.
- I keep notes but do not review them before contact.

It can also help with weak ties, e.g., acquaintances you have met once but have not interacted with for a long time.

However, be careful with some of the suggestions here — especially Farley Files — if you tend to prefer organizing information about people to interacting with them.

INTERVENTION VARIABLES

Depending on the concrete issue, the following intervention variables are relevant:

- **Target:** face recognition / name recall / interaction recall / pre-meeting review.
- **Context:** workplace / conferences / teaching / community / clients / online contacts.
- **Memory support:** internal rehearsal / photo review / contact note / Farley File / name tags / disclosure.
- **Capture timing:** during interaction / immediately after / end of day / before next meeting.
- **Information scope:** name only / name + context / interaction summary / structured profile.
- **Source boundary:** directly told / personally observed / publicly available / inferred / third-party.
- **Review trigger:** before scheduled meeting / after event / weekly / when tagged context appears.
- **Maintenance burden:** max. 30 seconds / 2 minutes / structured file / automated daily-log extraction.
- **Risk control:** no sensitive notes / secure storage / deletion date / visible-to-person test.
- **Failure mode:** phony intimacy / displacement behavior / privacy violation / no actual review / over-collection.

Method Options

The options here cover Remembering Faces, Remembering Names, and Remembering Interactions. Note that depending on the information you write down, Data Privacy Issues become relevant (see Box 1).

Box 1: Data Privacy Issues

If you write down personal information, that information needs to be protected against third parties. If the file concerns clients, students, employees, patients, or other role-based relationships, additional legal or institutional rules may apply.

Remembering Faces

- **Face blindness: Reduce the negative attribution:** People often interpret non-recognition as disinterest, aloofness, or disrespect. With long-term interaction partners (e.g., colleagues, fellow creatives), the person who fails to recognize others can be seen as asocial or socially odd. In some contexts, a brief disclosure can reduce misattribution, e.g., «I'm bad at recognizing faces out of context, so please remind me of your name if I hesitate.» Use this only where the social cost is acceptable.
- **Train Recognition with Photos:** If face blindness is not the issue and your memory is «only» bad, train face recognition. Many companies have websites with employee photos, allowing you to study faces in detail. If possible, document shared events with your own smartphone, so you have photos of people as they normally look. This is especially useful if looking into a person's face feels like looking into car headlights.
- **Use Nicknames (internally):** Giving people a private nickname can make it easier to remember them. It has to be something you associate with that specific face or look. It is never said out loud, but you use it to remember the person.
- **Use Context Anchors:** Faces are often easier to remember when tied to where you know the person from. Example note: «Tall, dark hair, round glasses — met at Berlin UX meetup, usually talks about accessibility.»
- **Actually Look at Them:** Make a point of studying them — not only eyes, hair, height, and weight, but also the shape of the nose, lips, brow, and hands. Describe their physical characteristics in words.
- **Use Non-Face Cues:** If faces are unreliable, use voice, posture, gait, gestures, clothing style, or typical context. Recognition does not have to come from the face alone.
- **Use Reference Images:** Instead of only describing the person, connect them to a stable category: «Looks like my former math teacher, but taller and more energetic.» or «Same hair and posture as X, but softer voice.»
- **Check Photos before Entering the Event:** Review photos shortly before the event, e.g., «Before the weekly meeting, spend two minutes reviewing the faces and names of people likely to attend.»

Remembering Names

- **Repeat their Name:** If you are introduced to a person, repeat their name out loud. Make sure you have understood and pronounced it correctly. If

the name is unusual, have them repeat it or ask them how to spell it (gives you sound and letters). You cannot remember something you have not understood.

- **Asking for the Name again:** It is possible to ask for the name again. Admitting it early is usually better. The social cost is usually lower before the conversation has gone on too long. For example, «I'm sorry, I know we met, but I'm blanking on your name.» One «trick» is to ask «Sorry, what was your name again?» and if they reply, make it about either their surname or given name, e.g., «No, your first name.» or «No, your last name.» This way, it appears as if you had at least remembered part of their name.
- **Actively use their Name in the Conversation:** When you talk with the person, use their name — in your mind and out loud. People usually like it, and it will help you remember it. Internally, add an anchor, e.g., «Anna — works on grant applications.» or «Sofia — asked about the workshop slides.» or connect it to a future action, e.g., «Nadine — send paper on workshop formats.» or «Tom — ask about venue contact.» This ties the name to future action, not just identity.
- **Take Notes:** After the interaction, write down the name with some information on the person (e.g., what the interaction was about, what they do, what might be relevant in the future). Write the name phonetically if needed, e.g., «Meike — MY-kuh, not Mika» or «Xiaoqing — sounds like <shao-ching>». Smartphones work well here, e.g., a notes app or task manager app — they are less conspicuous. Add fixed indicators, e.g., glasses, beard, hair color, body size, etc.
- **Look them up afterwards:** Many people have photos of themselves and other information on the Internet, for example on the website of the organization they work for, social networking sites, or private blogs. It gives you something to connect the name with.

Remembering Interactions

Some contacts are worth deepening, some are best kept light, and some require distance. Because time softens, distorts, or erases interaction memory, it helps to preserve interaction patterns accurately enough to choose the right level of contact. Recording open loops also allows you to quickly continue the interaction — it prevents repeated questions, missed promises, and awkward re-entry.

This information can be recorded in different ways:

Expanded Contacts

A simple contacts app (e.g., Apple’s Contacts, see Figure 1) usually has an option for a photo and notes. While usually not very comfortable, it can save a line or two on past interactions, e.g., «2025-04-05: Former partner was a medical doctor; tends to worry intensely about health topics. Avoid casual health speculation.» or «2025-04-02: Faith important to him; involved in youth groups. Avoid scheduling conflicts with church commitments.».

Farley Files

The expanded version of contact notes — structured information on people you have met and might meet again (see also Using a Daily Log for Farley File Entries on page 19).

It serves as a continuity aid (What did we discuss? What matters to them? What should I remember?), an interaction boundary aid (What should I avoid repeating? Where do I need caution?), and relationship calibration (What level and kind of contact fits this person, based on my experience?). It can work as system memory to foster good relationships and avoid repeating costly interaction patterns. For example, it can preserve hard-earned information so that later politeness, nostalgia, guilt, or time distance does not erase the lesson.

However, badly employed, a Farley File *can* feel phony. Use remembered details to avoid friction and show continuity, not to manufacture intimacy. Do not bring up personal details unless they naturally fit the relationship and context.

Less is more here — a Farley File can easily become a displacement behavior tar pit. The goal is not completeness; it is remembering what is important about the person and the interaction.

Signs the system is becoming a tar pit are you add entries for people you are unlikely to meet again, you research instead of contacting, you maintain fields that never affect interaction, you review files but do not initiate or improve collaboration, or you feel more in control of people-information but less socially present.

More general failure modes are that the file leaks, the author starts believing their own shorthand, old notes become current judgments, inferred traits become treated as facts, social interaction becomes over-managed, or the file becomes more important than the relationship.

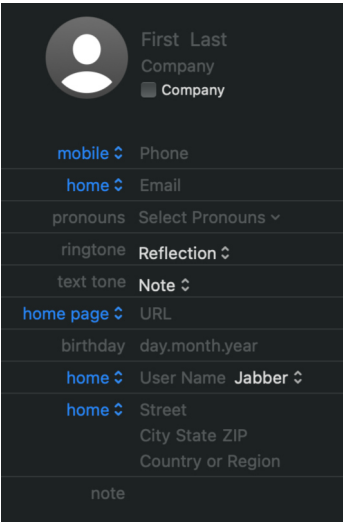


Figure 1: Apple's Contacts App with «note» field at the bottom.

Farley Files Background

A Farley File is a set of records on people you might meet again. The term comes from James Farley's file on people who had met President Roosevelt: «Whenever people were scheduled to meet again with Roosevelt, Farley would review their files. That allowed Roosevelt to meet them again while knowing their spouse, their children's names and ages, and anything else that had come out of earlier meetings or any other intelligence Farley had added to the file. The effect was powerful and intimate.»

This system is described beautifully in Robert A. Heinlein's «Double Star». Heinlein frames the Farley File as a memory aid rather than a deception. The point is not to pretend intimacy, but to compensate for the fact that one person may meet far more people than unaided memory can handle. Each visitor remembers their own encounter vividly, while the well-known person cannot possibly remember all such details. A Farley File restores some of that asymmetry: it allows the person to recall names, prior conversations, preferences, and small details that would matter if memory were perfect. In that sense, it is closer to writing down a friend's phone number or birthday than to faking concern. Used well, it can be polite, warm, and practical.

Possible Fields for a Farley File

The following information is often useful:

- **Identification:** Photo, Title, First Name, Given Name, Nickname
- **Context:** Useful to differentiate work, family, friends, etc.
- **Summary:** Especially for people you rarely interact with, a **quick summary** is useful. For example, «**Summary:** Good collaborator for structured projects; avoid open-ended support role.».
- **Relationship Level:** Useful to differentiate the amount of attention, e.g., deepen / maintain / light contact / avoid / professional only.
- **Family Status:** Partner, Children, Siblings, Pets, etc.
- **Qualifications:** Both formal and informal
- **Interaction Modes:** Useful if you work with the person, e.g., «Good in groups, draining one-on-one.», «Excellent by email, chaotic in meetings.», «Needs clear agenda.», «Great collaborator if deadlines are explicit.»
- **Meaningful Dates:** Birthday
- **Likes/Dislikes:** Anything from drinks, food, books, movies, etc.

- **Avoid:** Tripwire issues and other friction points to avoid, e.g., «Do not ask about dissertation — abandoned.», «Do not invite to open-ended brainstorming.»
- **Contact Information:** Anything a contacts app would have, including where you first met.
- **Gifts/Possible Gifts:** Ideas about what the person might like and what you have already given them.
- **Record the Last Interaction and the Open Loop:** A minimal interaction note allows you to continue the interaction in the future. It should contain the last contact (where, when, what) and the open loop (what should happen next). For example, «2026-05-12: Talked after seminar about zines and small presses. Send link to print shop.»
- **Capture Emotional Residue (Behaviorally):** Useful to build an assessment on the person, e.g., Not «felt bad after the interaction», but: «Left conversation exhausted; mostly listened to crisis talk; no reciprocity.», «Productive, concrete, left with clear next steps.». This preserves useful pattern memory without turning into vague mood journaling.

Information Types in Farley Files

The following types of information require different levels of sensitivity:

1. **Memory Facts:** Neutral continuity information, e.g., «Met at X. Works on Y. Partner is Z. Prefers email. Has two dogs.»
2. **Interaction Preferences:** Things that help future contact go smoothly, e.g., «Do not schedule mornings. Appreciates direct feedback. Avoid surprise calls.»
3. **Risk/Context Notes:** Sensitive but relevant information, e.g., «Self-disclosed diagnosis. Strong religious commitment. Public ideological activism. Ongoing conflict in group. Rumor circulating but unverified.»
4. **Boundary Notes:** Protective information based on past interaction, e.g., «Do not lend money. Keep professional distance. Do not rely on emotional reciprocity. Avoid one-on-one projects.»
5. **Private Mnemonic Cues:** Blunt recognition aids, e.g., internal nickname, visual hook, memorable physical cue.

Write 1 and 2 so they would be defensible if read. The others need encryption and should not be immediately visible on the page.

Private Note Standard and Data Privacy

Farley Files are essentially dossiers about people you interact with. They can contain the same information you might write in more prose-like diary entries, but here the information is condensed, easily accessible, and actionable. Thus, it needs ethical guardrails.

A Farley File should help you remember the person, not reduce the person to a file. Write Farley Files for private usefulness, accuracy, and future interaction. Because they may contain sensitive information, protect them like diary material. Some entries may be blunt; they should still be grounded in direct experience, disclosed information, or clearly marked inference. That being said, some people are costly to interact with. Remembering that is a legitimate system function.

Concretely, that means:

- Record only what helps future interaction or collaboration.
- Distinguish and note direct experience, disclosed information, inference, and third-party report.
- Prefer what the person directly told you over researched material. Use public information in proportion to the stakes of the interaction.
- Avoid sensitive traits unless the person made them interaction-relevant.
- Private recognition cues may be blunt if they help memory («weird nose, nervous hands»). Keep them in a less visible/private part of the entry and protect the file like diary material.
- Keep the system secure and delete stale entries.
- For difficult relationships, write the note around **experienced pattern + future boundary**. If a diagnosis, ideology, addiction, conflict history, or other sensitive fact is directly relevant, include it with source and context. For example: «Self-disclosed BPD diagnosis. Past friendship ended after repeated one-sided support pattern; she was not there for me when I needed support. Do not rely on this relationship. Keep distance if contact resumes.»

A Farley File earns its keep only when it changes review, contact, follow-up, or boundary decisions.

Use the Information

The best notes do not work if you do not actively use them. If there is a chance that you will meet someone again soon (conference, club/society meeting, etc.), look them up. This works well when you tag them in your records (e.g., #clubname in an address book, tag functionality on social network sites).

If you know you will talk to a person, do a pre-contact review. Before scheduled meetings, review the person's entry for 30–90 seconds, especially last contact, open loop, boundary, and one useful personal detail.

This also includes updating the information as things change. For example, interests change, people get divorced, partners die, etc. Review old entries periodically. Delete or neutralize stale, sensitive, or no-longer-useful information.

Names and Faces in Classes/Workshops

If you are giving a workshop or a small class, asking people to use name tags or signs with their names in front of them gives you more time to study faces and names. For example, you can do this while the class is working on something. Signs with names on the table also work as place cards in workshops, meaning participants take the same places each day. That makes it easier to remember the names.

TRIAL DEFINITION

If there is a need to improve remembering faces, names, or interactions, diagnose the problem first. What is difficult and why? Do you not look at the person closely enough to remember them? Do you take no notes? Do you meet too many people?

Use the Integration Worksheet and devise a trial. Look at the possible Intervention Variables and determine what you are going to change. Start with one context first, e.g., workplace, hobby group, etc. Then check whether you are successful locally — e.g., remembering faces, names, and/or interactions better — and globally, i.e., whether the creative system improves.

Example Trials

Names-only trial: For four weeks, after each recurring group meeting, add each new person's name plus one neutral context cue within five minutes. Before the next meeting, review for two minutes.

- **Success:** Correctly greet at least 70% of recurring people by name without checking during the interaction.
- **Abort:** Note-taking takes more than five minutes per event or feels socially intrusive.

Farley File minimal trial: For one professional community only, create entries only after meaningful interaction. Each entry may contain name, context, last interaction, and next possible connection. Have a clear evaluation standard, e.g., Does this note help me interact more accurately, appropriately, and reliably with this person later?

- **Success:** Before three planned follow-up meetings, review notes to avoid repeated questions or missed context.
- **Abort:** More time spent maintaining notes than interacting.

Workshop name support trial: In one workshop, use table name signs plus seating consistency.

- **Success:** Instructor can address 80% of participants by name by session three.
- **Abort:** Name signs become administrative clutter or participants move too often for the cue to work.

HAND-OFF

Remembering people — faces, names, interactions — is invaluable for good relationships. While for some people there are hard limits (e.g., face blindness), you can usually improve your memory by externalizing it.

However, it must not become a goal in itself — it is just a means for mutually beneficial interactions.

MORE INFORMATION

- Farley File: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farley_file
- «Double Star» by Robert A. Heinlein

APPENDIX

Using a Daily Log for Farley File Entries

If you use a digital daily log, e.g., Daily Notes in Obsidian (<https://obsidian.md>), you can automate Farley File entries with DataView. Just create a template to add the following entry to your daily log:

```
(farley:: SURNAME - FIRSTNAME) (farleyNote:: NOTE)
```

Then replace SURNAME - FIRSTNAME with the name of the person, and NOTE with what happened.

Have each Farley File entry contain a DataView query to check for the name in the directory that contains your daily logs (see image on the left).

The BtB comment is a folded-in box. It allows for notes that are not immediately visible, e.g., private recognition cues.

You can also use shorthand for the person, e.g., using «Miller - Frank» and «Buzzor» as names for the same person. In that case, just adapt the WHERE line. Here it would be:

WHERE contains(farley, "Miller - Frank")
OR contains(farley, "Buzzor")

