



# 13 Flashcard Do's and Don'ts

**A QUICK REFERENCE FOR EFFECTIVE  
FLASHCARDS THAT YOU CAN ANSWER IN  
UNDER 10 SECONDS**

# PREFACE — READ THIS FIRST

Hey there...

Al Khan here.

Together with the flashcard tips I told you about back there at the LeanAnki blog, this guide will help you create high-quality cards that you can answer in less than 10 seconds.

My goal here is to give you a quick "reference point" for effective flashcards, so expect that this PDF will focus more on the card examples.

Quick intro about the examples...

They are based on my own experience in **manually creating 4000+ flashcards** out of many textbooks and learning materials.

The anti-examples, on the other hand, were based on my 1000 other poorly-formulated cards that came before them.

Speed isn't the goal, though — better learning is.

**Direction comes first. Speed comes second.**

Anyway, let's get you started with your examples :)

Enjoy your free guide!

I'll see you later :)

*Al Khan*  
**Al Khan**

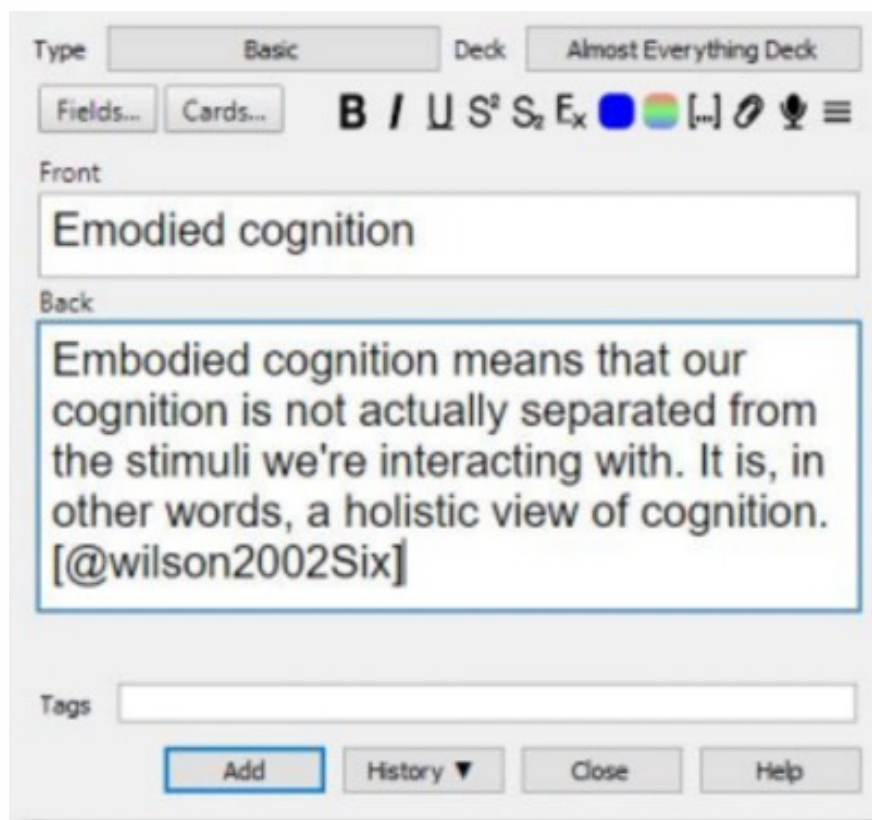
LeanAnki.com

# **PART I - AVOID MAKING THESE FLASHCARDS**

# 1. The Statement Card. Having the term on the front and definition at the back.

One intuitive thing that is usually a bad idea when creating flashcards is the [fact] - [definition] flashcard.

Like this:



When I first started, I thought this was the ONLY way to create flashcards.

## **Statements are NOT questions!**

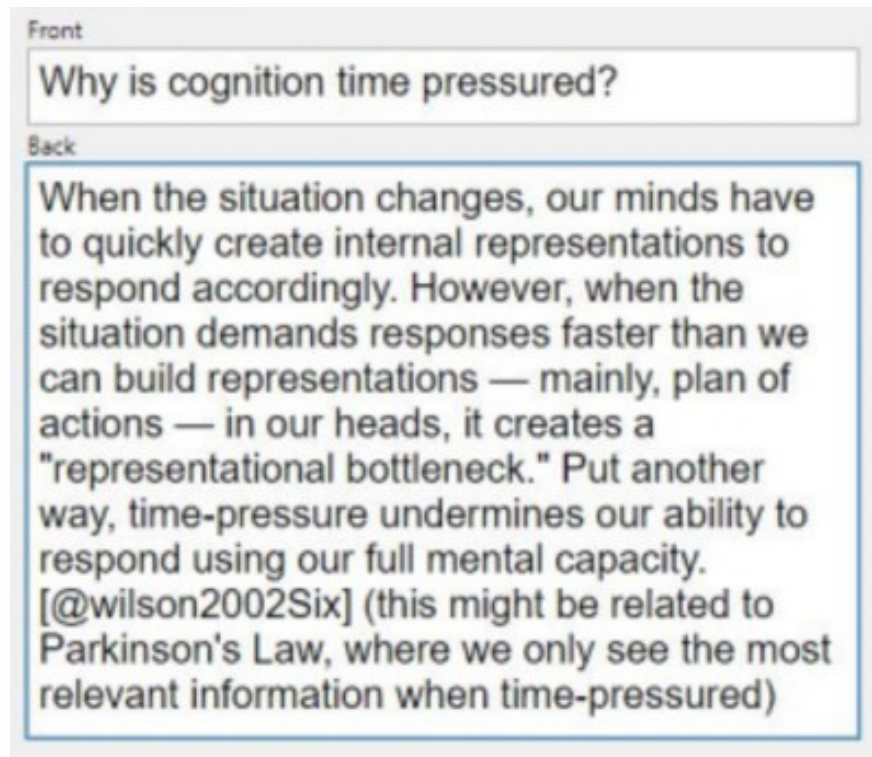
Why not just create proper questions so you can prompt your memory better?

Anki newbies often make this mistake because they want to remember more flashcards in “less time.”

Heck, they’d even do this with reversed card types to supposedly “save more time.”

They don’t see that they’re wasting EVEN MORE time because they’re doing brain dumps with each review.

## 2. The Midterm Essay Card. Cards that contain a huge wall of text.



This type of card, although less (much less) worse than the one above, turns you into a literal brain dump machine.

Just imagine answering 50 cards that take you 30 seconds to answer each, and then pressing "Again" just because you missed recalling a tiny detail.

It's kinda like how you're losing points in a midterm essay...

You forget to include a word your professor wanted to see, and boom — 5 point deduction.

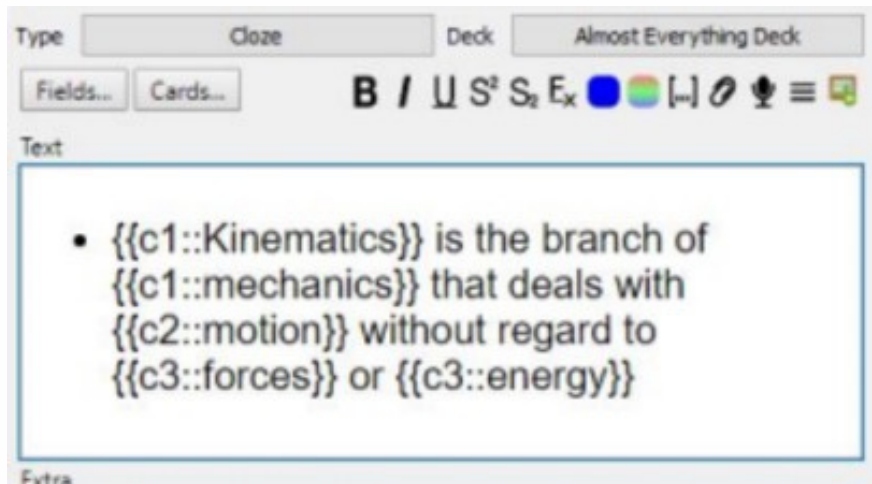
Now, it's not at all bad because it's still technically Retrieval Practice, (Karpicke, 2017) but really, answering this type of card feels like getting stabbed with a spoon every time.

What you can do here if you have these flashcards are two things:

1. Split them up into fewer cards that contain a single idea (not fact) at a time
2. Compress the answer into just a few words. Use arrows if you must.



### 3. The Life Hack Card. Cloze deletions/image occlusions straight from the material.



Many people think it's a good idea to "life hack" your Anki cards to "make more flashcards in less time".

And it's exactly why they reap the **negative** rewards later on.

Often, what happens with this type of card is:

**They only remember the card, but not the idea behind the card.**

Translation:

The cards don't work outside of Anki. They aren't really learning anything. They're spending all this time on Anki, but they're not actually progressing on their studies.

And trust me — this is the most pervasive mistake I've ever seen every Anki beginner do.

**AND THEN THEY TELL ME "ANKI DOES NOT WORK".**

It's like, "Sup bro, why didn't you come to my party"  
"Uhh, yeah bro I don't know how to drive the car, which means the car probably doesn't work."

Seriously, though, two common ways to do this mistake are:

1. Using image occlusion to your lecture slides like it's nobody's business
2. Using Cloze deletions on every single word that looks important

This is exactly why I do not recommend beginners to learn tons and tons of features...

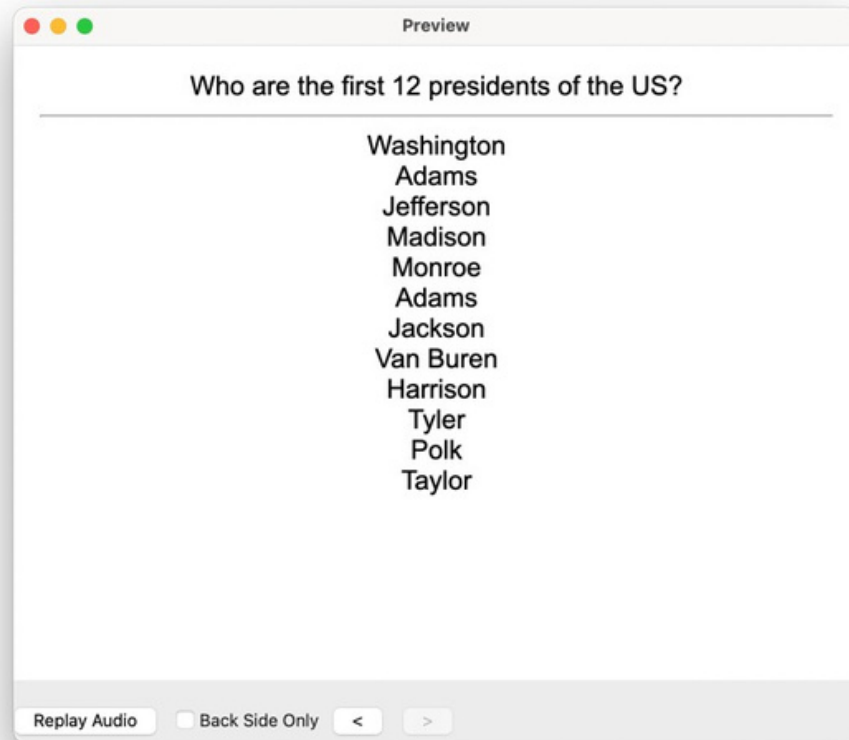
**They are easily distracting you from what's important!**

Anki newbies often do this with their lecture slides, and I've certainly done this mistake before to "study a Physics book in 1 day."

I TRULY believed I was learning, but in reality, I didn't.

When questions came from a different angle, I struggled to access anything from my memory.

## 4. The Shopping List. Cramming a list into a flashcard.



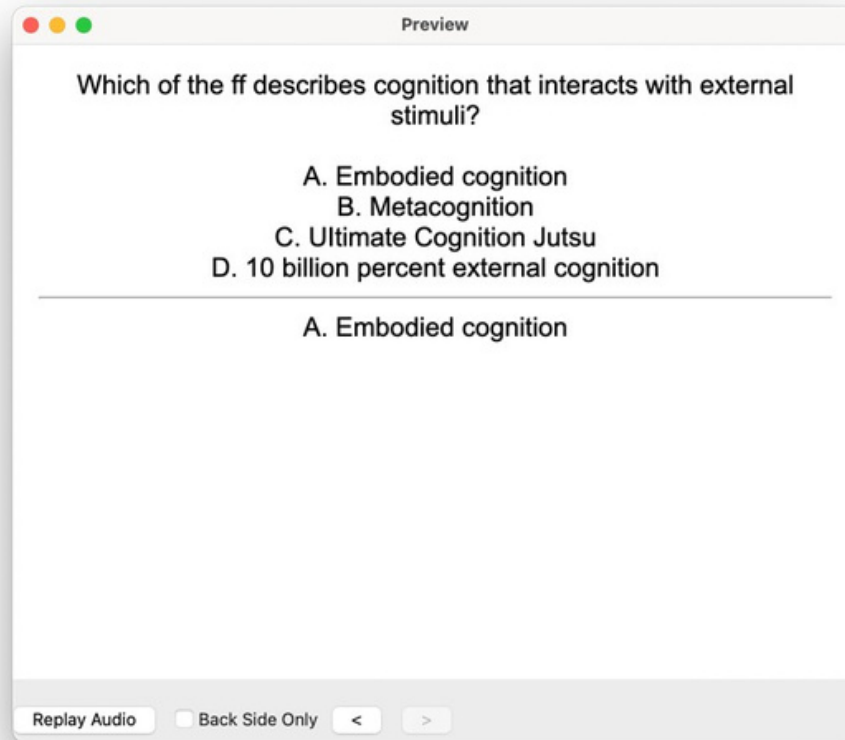
I first learned that turning lists into flashcard questions was a bad idea after reading 20 Rules of Formulating Knowledge by Piotr Wozniak.

Our working memory simply can't be "loaded" with this many items at once, which makes it unsustainable as a flashcard.

Ideally, you want flashcard reviews to have a 1:1 cue-to-idea ratio as possible so that you can review more quickly and without draining yourself.

So instead of this, either use the memory palace technique or simple mnemonics. They're way easier and more robust, too. (Yes, even better than Cloze Overlapper.)

## 5. The "Looks Familiar" Card. Inserting multiple choices.



The problem with Multiple Choice type of questions is that they don't train you to recall, but rather to just recognize.

Many students, especially those reviewing for their career exams, feel like they're actually learning just because they answer correctly on MCQ self-tests.

That being said, some career exams do have existing question banks that have impractically hard questions.

So let's make a simple rule for making MCQ cards:

**You can make them IF AND ONLY IF the costs of learning the whole topic far exceeds the benefits.**

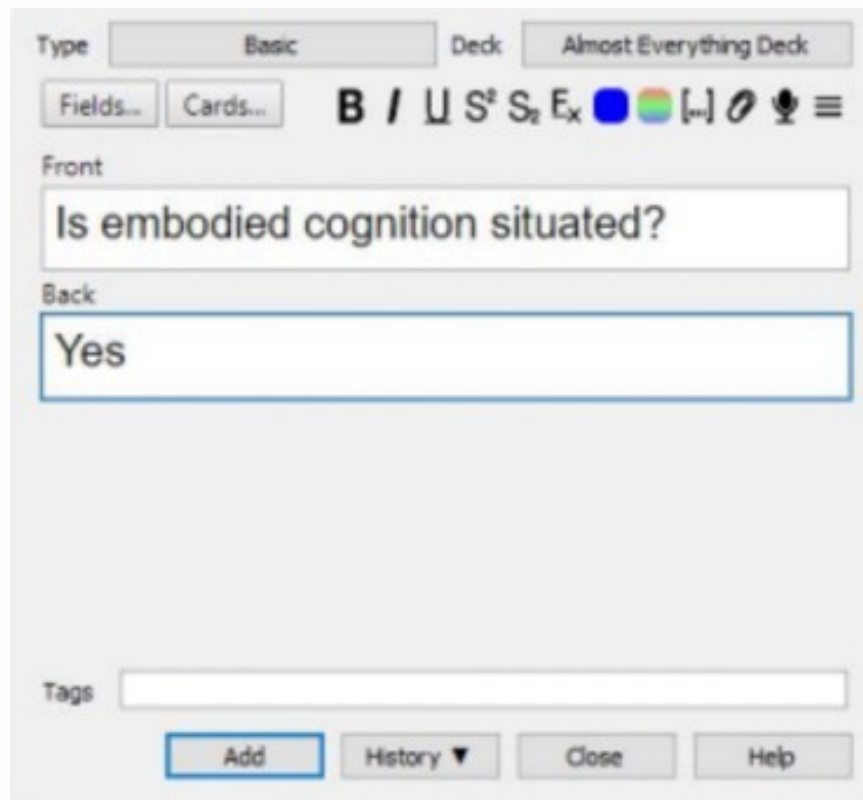
And you have to meet three conditions:

1. A prerequisite is to use a KNOWN question bank that is also a source of the exam
2. I recommend you use the answer itself rather than the letter of the answer
3. The exam has to be MCQ, of course

I did this in the past and it has helped me answer 5 “out-of-this-world” questions in a big exam.

It was worth it...kind of. (That's 5 out of around 1000+ MCQ questions I practiced.)

## 6. The Binary Card. Yes/no, true/false.



The image shows a digital flashcard interface. At the top, there are two dropdown menus: 'Type' set to 'Basic' and 'Deck' set to 'Almost Everything Deck'. Below these are two buttons: 'Fields...' and 'Cards...'. A toolbar contains icons for bold (B), italic (I), underline (U), strikethrough (S<sup>2</sup>), subscript (S<sub>2</sub>), exponent (E<sub>x</sub>), a blue circle, a rainbow circle, a square with a minus sign, a pencil, a microphone, and a menu icon. The 'Front' field contains the text 'Is embodied cognition situated?'. The 'Back' field contains the text 'Yes'. At the bottom, there is a 'Tags' input field and four buttons: 'Add', 'History' with a downward arrow, 'Close', and 'Help'.

These cards are worse than MCQ's for learning because cards don't test anything useful at all.

On top of that, it's even worse than simple recognition because EVEN IF you didn't know the answer NOR the question, you could be right 50% of the time.



# **PART II - EFFECTIVE FLASHCARD EXAMPLES**

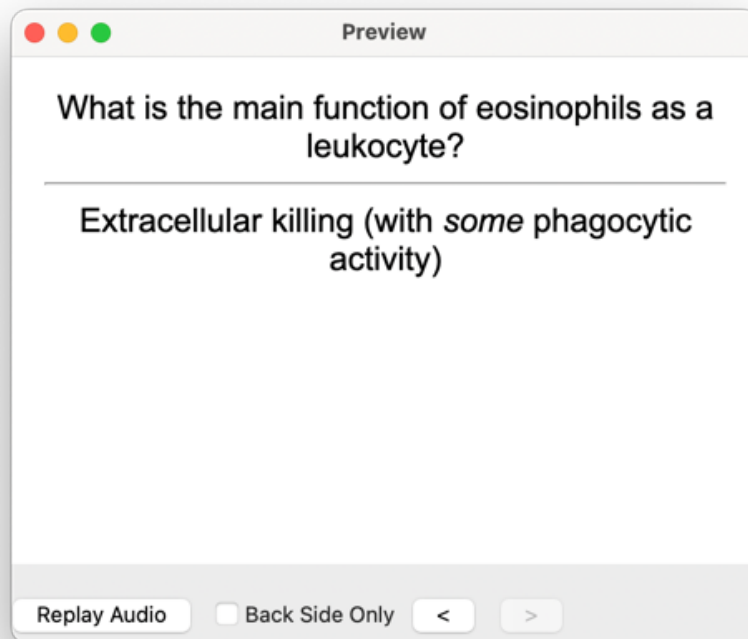
As you go through my examples here, I want you to constantly ask, “What’s common in all of these flashcards?”

## Example #1: Facts

Terms are constructed to convey meaning on their own!  
Use that to your advantage.

1. You learn the meaning of their ROOT WORDS; or
2. Use the fact in a bigger context

For example, you can make a card like this:



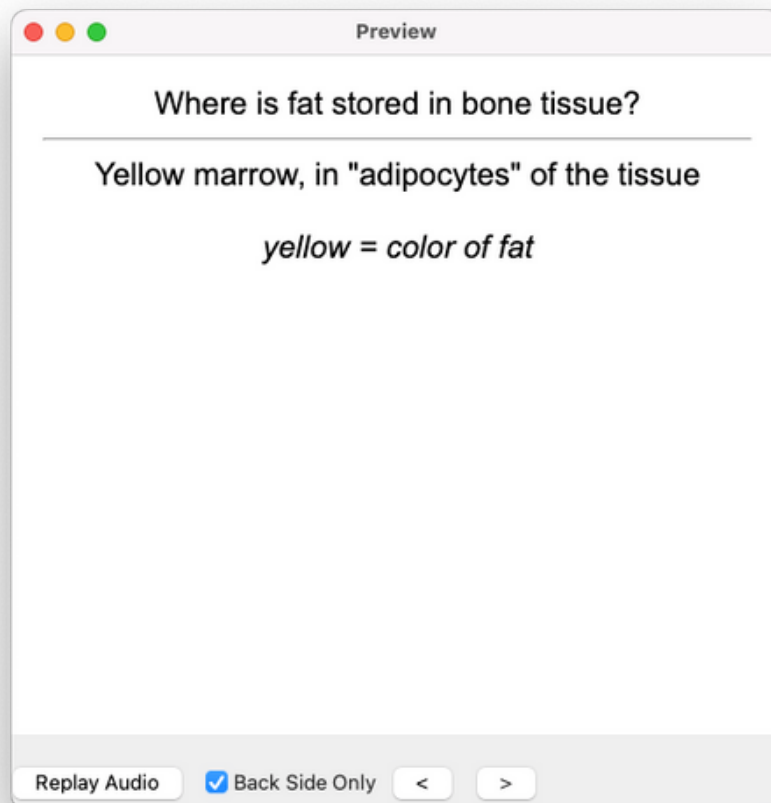
...so you won't need to a separate card for "leukocyte."

If you already have one, then you can probably delete it.

Similarly, I don't need to have a card for "adipocyte" if I simply infer the word based on its root words:

- Adi = "fat"
- Cute = "cell"

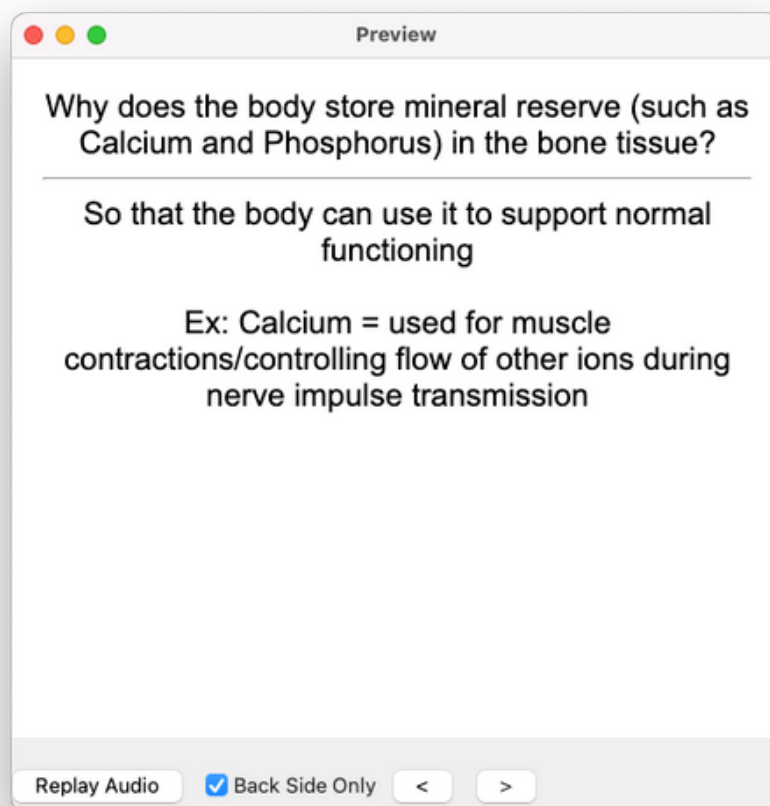
Combining the two concepts of learning the meaning and using it in a bigger context, I made a card like this:



## Example #2: Complex information

For complex information...

- **DON'T:** Try to create a flashcard for every bolded word, or a fill-in-the-blanks type of card.
- **DO:** Understand the concept as a whole before making cards.



## Example #3: Hard to remember formulas

For hard to remember formulas...

- **DON'T** just try to remember it through sheer repetition
- **DO:**
  - Try to understand how the formula was derived before making a card
  - Try to use it in actual problems before making a card
  - Add an association to your card

Here's an example of "understanding the formula before making cards":

Forward procedure, what is the equivalent of  $\alpha_{t+1}(i)$ ?

---

$$\alpha_{t+1}(j) = \left[ \sum_{i=1}^N \alpha_t(i) a_{ij} \right] b_j O_{t+1}$$

"probability of observation sequence w/ some state  $S_i$  as the last state (at time  $t$ ) — given some model  $\lambda$ "

And here's an example of making an association:

Sum and difference identity for  $\sin(A + B)$ ?

---

$$\sin(\alpha + \beta) = \sin \alpha \cos \beta + \cos \alpha \sin \beta$$

sin = same sign  
cos = same func  
same name

## Example #4: Processes

- **DON'T:** Make cards for each step of the process without learning the process as a whole first!  
Processes are "complex" information, too.
- **DO:**
  - Compress the processes into fewer, but bigger chunks/patterns (ex: compressing 3 steps into a single pattern)
  - Create drawings and diagrams without looking at the source material to see if you really understood before making cards
  - Add the drawings to your cards!

See the next page for the example...

Front

[ileum co-transport] How does Na get into the epithelial cell from the ileum?

Back

Active transport from epi cell to blood → Na conc. gradient → Na from ileum diffuse into epi cell

Help Add History Close

Tip: you can use the sticky (F9) so you don't have to copy the image over and over



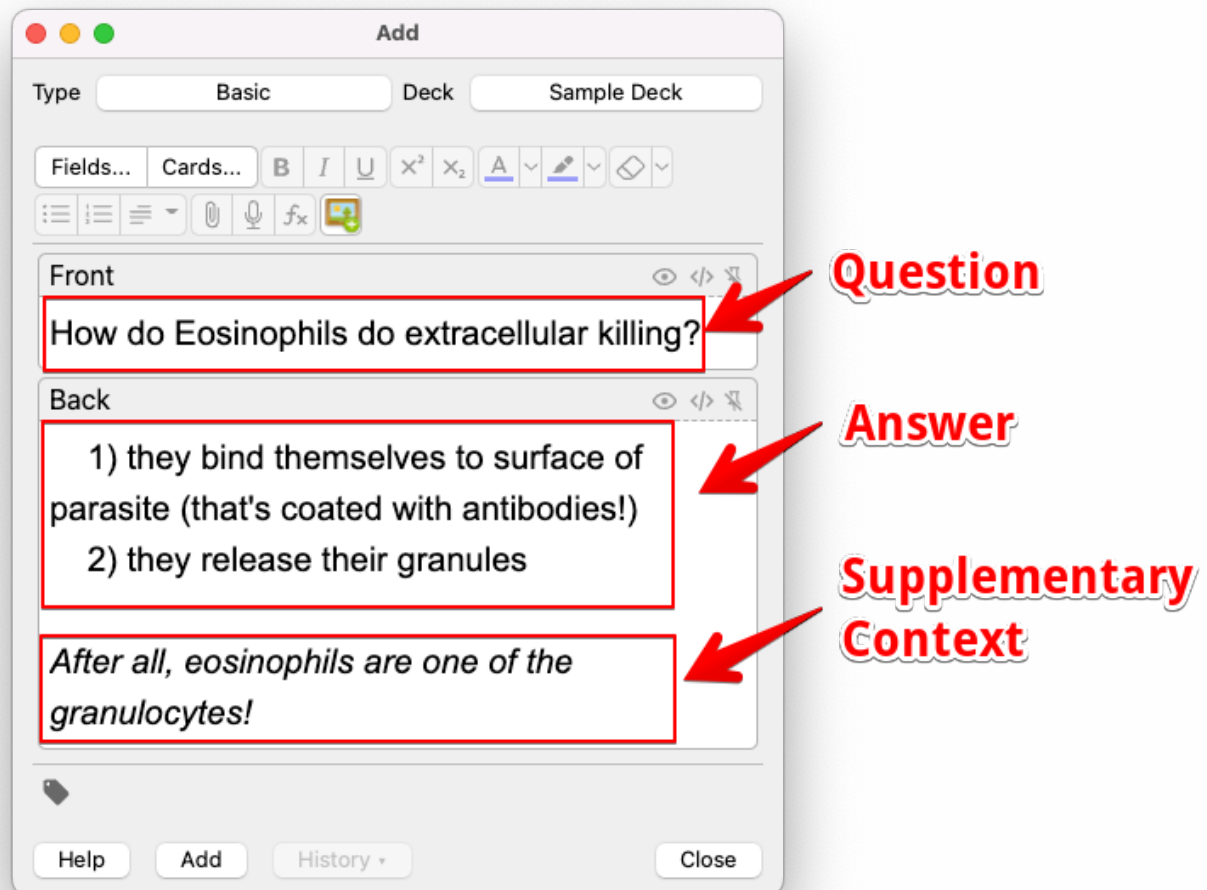
# **BONUS - How to Structure a Good Flashcard**

Did you notice how each card in the "effective flashcards" portion of this PDF had the SAME pattern?

In case you didn't, let me reveal that structure to you...

This is actually part of the larger Anki course I created that contains my best material, but I wanted to give this to you for free because it is REALLY relevant.

Enter, the **10-Second Flashcard** — or just 10SF.



This is the structure that allowed me to have an average answer time of less than 10 seconds per flashcard...

...which then allowed me to make 500-900 reviews per day REALLY sustainable and enjoyable.

You do the math to find out how much time it took me to study each day :)

**Let's talk about the 10SF structure real quick...**

1. **Question.** It has to be a question, not a statement. Specific cues are much faster to recall.
2. **Answer.** Self-explanatory.
3. **Supplementary context (optional).** This should be at the "Back" portion — this is extra information to add oomph to the card's conceptual foundation or serve as re-learning material.

Credits to Prerak Juthani for the latter component.

**My tip for you:** take a screenshot of your source or make a relevant comment as your supplementary context :)

## **In conclusion...**

Congratulations — you've just saved yourself at least MONTHS of flashcard hell...

I can tell you for a fact that you really are on the fast track to becoming a more efficient learner...like myself ;) (humble brag)

So don't worry much if it's taking you a bit of time to create a flashcard...

**Flashcard making is a skill that can be developed!  
You'll get better with the right guidance :)**

And you must focus on developing it — it's one of the most important skills to get better at if you really want to become a pro using Anki.

There's no need to overcomplicate things and learn tons and tons of miscellaneous features.

That's because of a simple reason...

That is...

**If you know how to use Anki as a TOOL for studying then you can get REALLY far with the essentials.**

I have. My students have.

So can you.

*Al Khan*

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To smarter studying,

*Al Khan*

Al "Keep it Simple" Khan