

Anki Flashcards: A University of Saskatchewan Royal College Study Resource

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When it comes to exam studying, there are many approaches to learning. The making and using of flashcards is a common one. With the digital age there has been a transition from index hardcopy flashcards to web based databases.

In the fall of 2013 some residents at the University of Saskatchewan systematically looked at various flashcard applications that were on the market and compared them. There was a clear winner – Damien Elme’s [Anki](#).

Anki uses two key concepts in its algorithm development which makes it technically better than most: *active recall* and *spaced repetition*. It is almost completely free, with applications free online and on nearly all handheld devices (the one exception is that there is a one-time fee for Apple handhelds), making it one of the most affordable options on the market. It is also amazing at synchronizing across platforms meaning you can start a study session at your desk, continue the same one on your phone on the bus ride home and then finish it while sitting watching a re-run of *Friends* on your tablet. And finally, decks can be freely shared with others allowing for collaborative database building.

Studying principles

Active recall is what flashcard studying is all about. This is the practice of asking a question and then having to answer them based on memory. This is in contrast to passive studying, where you are simply reading, listening or watching something. Active recall has been demonstrated to be crucial in strengthening memory.

Spaced repetition is what puts Anki a peg above the rest. Spaced repetition is the idea that we learn better and have better recall if you review material spaces over time rather than studying the same concept multiple times in one session. Anki uses evidence-based spaced repetition timelines so that you are reintroduced to an idea (a flashcard, or set of flashcards) at the right time.

What this practically means is that once the cards have been built and you are studying from the deck as you go through you are asked by Anki how “good” you felt about knowing the answer. The better you feel, the later it will be until you

see that card again, the worse you feel, the sooner it will be until you see it again. So you review the areas you are weaker in (also likely the areas you like less) more often and less often the areas you know well, but always with a gap between each time you see the same card in keeping with the concept of spaced repetition.

Building a database

With all this in mind the U of S residents decided to start building a flashcard database of Public Health flashcards in Anki. The ultimate goal is to use these flashcards for Royal College Exam (RCE) studying, but the same cards can be used for studying for course exams, practice writtens and orals and more.

At this point the U of S has built up a database of nearly 2000 cards and we have only been building cards for about one year. The cards are built based on the academic half day curriculum, but cards have been added based on online courses, webinars, self-studying and more.

Sharing across residents and programs

The U of S decks are shared online. Each deck is name using the format "USask PHPM – Title" so searching the online database of decks using "USask PHPM" should bring up all the decks we share.

There are limitations to sharing these decks. The cards are not perfect – there may be typos or questions that do not make sense for those who download them. There are gaps in subject matter. There may be cards on topics that are not relevant anymore, or may be out of date. In short, we ask that users be aware of the limitations that can and do exist.

How to actually use Anki

There is one major issue with Anki – it has a steeper learning curve than some of the more expensive and less useful flashcard applications. This does not mean that those who are technically inept cannot use it, it just means they will need to take some extra time to be able to take advantage of the resource.

I will not address how to actually use Anki to in this article as Mr. Elme's has built a complete and concise library of materials to help you learn – there are videos as well as written explanations of what Anki is and how to use it. You can learn how to make cards, how to study them and how to both share decks and have access to shared decks.

The U of S will continue to build our database and make it publicly available for use. Please feel free to go ahead and look at what we have available on a regular basis and steal at will, modifying as necessary. Also, please feel free to build your own database and share.

If you have any questions please contact our chief resident at saskphpr@gmail.com and we will get back to you as soon as possible.

Please be aware we will not advise on technical issues. Please use the available Anki troubleshooting information and contact for those.