



# Prospective Memory in Context

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## Abstract

Although memory usually is associated with recall of past events or previously learned information, an equally important function of memory is to remember to perform intended actions in the future. Remembering to perform an action when there is a delay between the point at which the intention to act is formed and the point at which the action can be carried out is called prospective memory. A defining aspect of prospective memory tasks is that they are to be performed without external prompting, that is, we have to remember to perform the task without being asked to do so at the time that it is to be performed. However, a potentially important source of support for performing prospective memory can arise from the context in which the task occurs. The preparatory attentional and memory processes theory places a considerable emphasis on the role of context, especially with respect to how limited capacity resources are allocated to support prospective memory performance. Research on the effects of context and prospective memory is reviewed, with an

emphasis on how context affects allocation of attentional resources and how context is used to initiate preparatory attentional processing. This overview leads to the proposal of greater parallels between time-based and event-based prospective memory than often is assumed to be the case and concludes by outlining possibilities for future research.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Prospective memory refers to the collection of tasks that involve forming an intention to carry out an action when that action must be delayed. A distinguishing characteristic of prospective memory tasks is that we must remember to perform the delayed action without an external request to remember at the time of remembering. This stands in contrast to retrospective memory, which is more frequently associated with direct requests to remember. If I have to remember to give someone a message, seeing that person is not accompanied by an external request to try to remember the intention of conveying the message, whereas retrospective memory often involves an external prompt for the to be retrieved information. If I ask what you did on your summer trip, you most likely will try to remember in order to respond to this retrospective memory request. Another key aspect of prospective memory tasks is that they are often performed in the midst of other activities that must be interrupted to perform the prospective memory task. For instance, to buy a birthday card on your way home, you must remember to deviate from your standard drive and do so without prompting while you are also engaged in driving, perhaps listening to the radio and thinking about the day. To understand the effects of context in prospective memory, it is important to consider the relationship between the prospective memory task and these other ongoing activities.



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## 2. METHODOLOGICAL HISTORY

### 2.1 Investigating Prospective Memory in the Laboratory: The Ongoing Task

An important step in the history of prospective memory research was the introduction by [Einstein and McDaniel \(1990\)](#) of what has become the most commonly used laboratory paradigm for studying prospective memory. In this approach, participants complete an ongoing activity (e.g., lexical decision) with the additional prospective memory instructions to make a special response in the presence of a particular prospective memory

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