

## ELT Hot Seat Question – What is a “variable”?

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In 1955 George A. Miller, a professor at Harvard, delivered a paper titled “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two,” which helped set into motion a new field of research known as cognitive psychology. His original work on “thinking” has been proven and built upon over the last five decades. The insights of Miller are what we have built the “marker” analogy on. Though the marker analogy is a powerful visual, the question our ELT’s sometimes get is; what constitutes a “variable”?

In its simplest form it can be seen as numbers. ( i.e. telephone numbers -this is the example offered by Miller in his 1955 paper for short term thinking.) Long term thinking and processing is more complex.

Imagine this scenario, you walk into a meeting and you know that the group needs to make some decisions on the conference they are holding. You sit down at the meeting where your “thinking brain” is leading the way so that you can help problem solve and strategize with the team.

Here is what our complex thinking brain may categorize our “variables” as:

- Variable #1 (or marker) could be related to “budgets”
- Variable #2 could be concerned with “location”
- Variable #3 may be about “attendee interest”
- Variable #4 might be around “self-protection”

“Complex Thought” is what the thinking brain does. It is the ability to think about multiple things (big and small, important and not, short-term and long-term) at once, and consider how each variable is affected by the others. When we have all of “our markers” our brain has lots of information to make the best and most strategic decisions. However, as we drop our markers the first thing to go is our ability to see the big picture, stay attached to vision and strategy. We become less empathetic and we think less about the health of the relationship. Overall, it is harder to access our expertise and experience.

The more markers we drop, the less information we have available to us to make the best decisions and the more self-focused we become.

