

Preventing exam 'blackout' or 'brain-freeze' using SAFE Method

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SAFE Method is your language of analysis, spoken and written, regardless of your subject of study or academic assignment. The sooner you learn the *SAFE Method* the better able you will be to fulfil the requirements at all stages of study, including revising efficiently, assimilating class teaching, and preparing your homework.

Below I explain another key benefit how working with the template offered by *SAFE* can be conducive in preventing or managing a blackout regarding the material, especially under exam conditions.

Potential blackouts:

Blackouts, when all your knowledge and understanding goes 'blank' is something that can happen not only in front of your exam paper, but also during revision. It is also not something that 'weak' students experience. Often intelligent and well-prepared students can 'enter blackout zone'. A blackout is an experience of being overwhelmed, of feeling complete information burnout. It feels like there is nothing there, in the brain. But we know that this is not the case, there is a lot of 'stuff' in the brain. The problem is accessing and organising your knowledge and thoughts when you are in a pressured and stressful environment.

In practising *SAFE Method* students learn there is no such thing as '*I don't know what to say or write*', because there is no such thing as '*I cannot think*', thereby developing confidence in mastering various situations and demands.

So how can you manage when it seems that you 'cannot think' no matter how hard you try, like when experiencing a blackout'?

There are two issues with a blackout; firstly, to try and avoid it from happening in the first place, and secondly, if it is creeping up on you, it is important to learn how to manage it quickly, and get yourself out of the fog, with as little damage as possible, particularly in exam conditions, when time is a resource that matters. Blackout is not real, but it is real in its effects. It is not a real phenomenon, because the information and understanding are all still there, it has not escaped your brain; it is just that you feel unable to access and structure it properly, therefore, it is a blackout. The electrical wiring is intact, but it is not being switched on.

Working with *SAFE Method* will inevitably minimise the 'blacking out' that can happen to students during revision and exams. Firstly, working with a structural method, as we do here, will minimise the stress (the gap between perceived demands and perceived abilities to deal with these demands)

by amplifying your abilities and harnessing them within a system. You can become organised and efficient in handling the material. The mountains of folders and notes are the primary reason for feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and blacked-out. Even if you could memorise all the content, it would not help you to order it appropriately and write coherent essays in stressful situations.

If a blackout is materialising, you can learn how to take control of it, and nip it in the bud immediately by using the fundamental anchors in the template offered by *SAFE*.

The first and only question you ask yourself is: 'What is it that I need to explain, and how do I need to explain it?' You should never have a blackout over that element because it is not possible to have a blackout on the issue of what is written in front of you, in the exam question. That is your first, and always available anchor. It will chart your pathway to all other anchors offered by *SAFE*.

The psychological elements that make the student's perception of the question foggy should be handled well before the exam by a structured plan of study. Once you clearly perceive this starting point, you move to the next anchor, and the next and the next – these are the anchors of *SAFE Method*, as summarised by the template skeleton, your satnav with its roadmap.

You will begin with, 'What is my dependent concept, the explained concept?' (it is written in front of you in the question!), then you go on to the definition of this dependent concept. The next stage is 'What is my independent concept, the explaining concept?' followed by defining it. Then you need to link them together by assessing how and why they are linked to provide an explanation. After this the argument is broadened by the need to offer alternative explanations or reasons, and so the analysis proceeds.

The whole idea underpinning the analytical framework is that you can use it like an automatic pilot, by *SAFE* being embedded in the way that you think all the time. If any confusion is arising, you are able to use the *SAFE* elements to serve as your anchors, the first one of which, is 'What is my dependent concept?' This is easily accessible because it is always reflected in the question itself. That is how you hold on to this first anchor.

Because we are grounding ourselves in study and revision through using a structural framework, if you feel you are experiencing a blackout, you can read the question again, and write down in circles, the X (explaining independent concept) and the Y (explained dependent concept): the Y being always in front of you. Once you are holding onto this first anchor, you have a way out of the blackout, because you have taken control of the steering wheel, structuring the material, and the structure helps you recall the knowledge you may wish to use in your argument.

A blackout is likely to be damaging and enduring mostly when you have no tools to fight the darkness it generates which is how students can be sucked into this feeling of helplessness. *SAFE Method* is the way out of this tunnel. Instead of fighting the darkness a blackout creates, you can enlist *SAFE* as your steering wheel, and there is your light; the darkness is illuminated, and banished. Shed light on the doubt and confusion by employing the analytical anchors provided by *SAFE*, and you will have arms in the battle, saving time wasted during revision and in exams by self-doubt.

Most blackouts occur because of accumulated stress and anxiety in the run up to major exams or during the exam itself. Unfortunately, this is when you need to perform at your best, after long preparation for the challenge. Since *SAFE Method* allows you to become your own teacher, it empowers your revision by implanting the satnav in yourself, thus providing you with peace of mind at every stage of your study and revision.

You will know that you will be able to answer the questions because you know *how* to do it on your own. The confidence comes from having a robust method to use. There is no need to panic about what you can and cannot remember, or start to question your essay writing skills. All and any questions can be answered when approached in this methodical way.

You are in control.

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