

Dealing with a mental block or a 'brain freeze' using the SAFE Method

The *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 more 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 to preventing or managing a mental block regarding subject material, especially under exam conditions.

Potential mental blocks

A mental block – 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. Additionally, it is not something that 'weak' students experience. Often intelligent and well-prepared students can enter the 'brain freeze zone'. A mental block is an experience of being overwhelmed, of feeling a complete information burnout and being unable to think clearly. 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 the *SAFE Method*, students learn that 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 they develop 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 you experience a mental block?

There are two priorities with a mental block: first, to try and avoid it from happening in the first place; and second, 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. A mental block 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, they have not escaped your brain. It is just that you feel unable to access and structure them properly, therefore, it is a mental block. The electrical wiring is intact, but it is not being switched on.

Working with the *SAFE Method* will inevitably minimise the cognitive and emotional fatigue that can happen to students during revision and exams. Applying a structural method will minimise the stress (the gap between perceived demands and perceived abilities to deal with these demands) by amplifying their abilities and harnessing them within a system. As a student, you can become organised and efficient in handling the material. The mountains of folders, power points and notes are the primary reason for feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Even if you could memorise all the content, this would not help you order it appropriately and write coherent essays in stressful situations.

If a mental block 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 to ask yourself is: 'What is it that I need to explain, and how do I need to explain it?'. You should never have a mental block over that element, because it is not possible to have a mental block 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 a 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 the *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 explained/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 connected 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 auto-pilot, by embedding *SAFE* in the way that you think all the time. If any confusion starts to arise, you are able to use the *SAFE* elements to serve as your anchors, the first one of which is: 'What is my explained/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 by using a structural framework, if you feel you are experiencing a mental block you can read the question again, then write down in circles the X (explaining/independent concept) and the Y (explained/dependent concept). The Y will always be in front of you. Once you are holding onto this first anchor, you have a way out of the mental block, 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 mental block 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. The *SAFE Method* is a way out of this tunnel. Instead of fighting the darkness a mental block 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*.

Most mental blocks 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 a long preparation for the challenge. Since the *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.