

PART 1: Based on the text below, choose the correct option for each question. Only one item is correct.

(Each question in this part is worth 6 marks, making up a total of 60 marks.)

What happens in the brain when your mind blanks

(P1) Mind blanking is a common experience with a wide variety of definitions ranging from feeling "drowsy" to "a complete absence of conscious awareness." In an opinion article published in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, a team of neuroscientists and philosophers compiles what we know about mind blanking, including insights from their own work observing people's brain activity.

(P2) "During wakefulness, our thoughts transition between different contents. However, there are moments that are seemingly devoid of reportable content, referred to as mind blanking," writes the research team. "It remains unclear what these blanks represent, highlighting the definitional and phenomenological ambiguities surrounding mind blanking."

(P3) In the past, mind blanking has only been studied using research and experiments developed to study mind wandering – a similar internal experience in which our thoughts "flow seamlessly like a stream." The researchers argue that mind blanking is a distinct experience that involves feeling sleepier, more sluggish, and making more errors, and should be inspired by mind wandering research, but considered independently.

(P4) The research team sought to better understand mind blanking by parsing through 80 relevant research articles - including some of their own – in which the researchers recorded participants' brain activity when they were reporting that they were 'thinking of nothing. Takeaways from their research include, among others:

- Mind blank frequency varies greatly between different people, but a person experiences the phenomenon about 5%-20% of the time on average.
- Common experiences defined as "mind blanking" include lapses of attention, memory issues, and a cessation of inner speech, among others.
- Mind blanks tend to happen toward the end of long, sustained attention tasks like exams and after sleep deprivation or intense physical exercise, but are also a typical waking state.
- Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) report mind blanking more frequently than neurotypical people.
- Mind blanking is part of the clinical description of generalized anxiety disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). It is also relevant to several other clinical conditions including strokes, seizures, traumatic brain injuries, and Kleine-Levin syndrome – which causes people to sleep up to 20 hours per day.

(P5) The researchers speculate that the common factor between different forms of blanking may be related to changes in arousal levels, leading to a malfunction of key cognitive mechanisms such as memory, language, or attention. Given that blanking experiences vary so greatly – both in terms of people's subjective experiences and their neural activity – the researchers propose a framework that describes mind blanking as a dynamic group of physiologically driven experiences mediated by arousal states, or a person's state of physiological "vigilance." As they describe it, this means that when the brain is in a high- or low-arousal state, a mind blank is more likely to occur.

(P6) The experience of a 'blank mind' is described as being as intimate and direct as that of bearing thoughts. The researchers aim is to start a conversation and see how mind blanking relates to other seemingly similar experiences, such as meditation. The team hopes that acknowledging mind blanking as a distinct mental state in future research will help build toward a deeper understanding of mind blanking.

(P7) "We believe that the investigation of mind blanking is insightful, important, and timely," says lead author Thomas Andrillon. "Insightful because it challenges the common conception that wakefulness involves a constant stream of thoughts. Important because mind blanking highlights the interindividual differences in subjective experience. Collectively, we stress that ongoing experiences come in shades with varying degrees of awareness and richness of content."

1. According to paragraph 1 (P1), which of the following best describes the focus of the research team?
 - a) They compiled existing knowledge and contributed insights on mind blanking.
 - b) They were investigating the causes of insomnia and its neurological patterns.
 - c) They aimed to define mind wandering in terms of external distractions.
 - d) They developed a cure for neurological conditions associated with sleep deprivation.
2. In paragraph 2 (P2), the authors emphasize that:
 - a) Mind blanking is easily measurable using current brain imaging techniques.
 - b) There is confusion regarding what mind blanking truly represents.
 - c) All conscious experiences involve clear mental content and awareness.
 - d) The scientific community has already agreed on the definition of mind blanking.
3. In paragraph 3 (P3), the authors argue that:
 - a) Mind blanking studies derive information from both asleep and awake situations.
 - b) It's common that people become less error-prone during mind blanking episodes.
 - c) Mind blanking is a unique experience that differs from mind wandering.
 - d) Mind blanking is identical to mind wandering and should be treated as such.
4. The word **sluggish** in paragraph 3 (P3) is closest in meaning to
 - a) alert
 - b) energetic
 - c) slow-moving
 - d) enthusiastic
5. The word **their** in paragraph 4 (P4), sentence 1, refers to
 - a) the readers
 - b) the journal editors
 - c) the authors/researchers
 - d) the participants
6. Which of the following is NOT mentioned in paragraph 4 (P4) as a situation related to mind blanking?
 - a) After sustained mental effort
 - b) Following intense physical exercise
 - c) After lack of sleep
 - d) During creative tasks like painting
7. According to paragraph 4 (P4), which of the following is TRUE?
 - a) ADHD patients tend to report more mind blanking than others.
 - b) Mind blanking happens mainly under clinical conditions.
 - c) Everyone experiences mind blanking in similar ways and frequencies.
 - d) Mind blanking does not appear registered in psychiatric manuals.
8. In paragraph 5 (P5), the authors propose that
 - a) mind blanking is strongly influenced by physiological arousal states.
 - b) the various types of mind blanking share the same physical cause.
 - c) people with low arousal levels are immune to mind blanking.
 - d) mind blanking results directly from neurological diseases.
9. Why is the activity of meditation mentioned in paragraph 6 (P6)?
 - a) To compare to mind blanking, as an activity apparently similar.
 - b) To demonstrate that mind blanking is a voluntary situation.
 - c) To reject the hypothesis that emptying the mind is impossible.
 - d) To illustrate the emptiness of mind that happens in mind blanking.
10. Which of the sentences below best expresses the essential information in paragraph 7 (P7)?
 - a) The researchers stress the need to acknowledge collective differences in the content of thought.
 - b) The researchers believe that most individuals experience the same types of thoughts while awake.
 - c) The researchers highlight the complexity of conscious experience and the value of mind blanking studies.
 - d) The researchers suggest that mind blanking is a rare and relevant phenomenon.



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PART 2: MARK EACH OF STATEMENTS BELOW AS TRUE (T) OR FALSE (F) ACCORDING TO THE TEXT. *(Each question in this part is worth 5 marks, making up a total of 40 marks.)*

1. () Mind blanking is a clearly defined experience with universally accepted characteristics.
2. () Researchers suggest that mind blanking differs from mind wandering and should be studied independently.
3. () Mind blanking is considered a normal waking state and can occur during exams or after intense physical activity.
4. () According to the text, everyone experiences mind blanking with the same frequency and under similar conditions.
5. () Children with ADHD tend to report fewer mind blanking episodes than neurotypical individuals.
6. () The researchers propose that changes in arousal levels might explain why mind blanking happens.
7. () Mind blanking is linked to several clinical conditions, including anxiety disorders and brain injuries.
8. () The authors believe that studying mind blanking may help improve treatments for memory loss.



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WHAT HAPPENS IN THE BRAIN WHEN YOUR MIND BLANKS

ANSWER KEY

PART 1 - EACH QUESTION IN THIS PART IS WORTH 6 MARKS, MAKING UP A TOTAL OF 60 MARKS.

- 1) A
- 2) B
- 3) C
- 4) C
- 5) C
- 6) D
- 7) A
- 8) A
- 9) A
- 10) C

PART 2 - EACH QUESTION IN THIS PART IS WORTH 5 MARKS, MAKING UP A TOTAL OF 40 MARKS.

- 1) F (paragraph 2)
- 2) T (paragraph 3)
- 3) T (paragraph 4)
- 4) F (paragraph 4)
- 5) F (paragraph 4)
- 6) T (paragraph 5)
- 7) T (paragraph 4)
- 8) F (paragraphs 7)