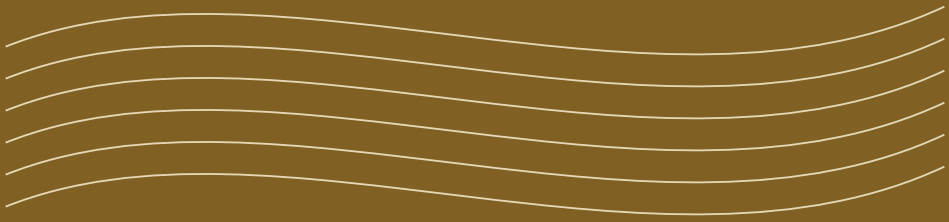
DISASTER DRAW

# When the Power Goes Out

*A regional blackout and the dependencies inside an ordinary day*

November 2026 · Concise digital edition



# About this edition

An original synthesis of linked primary accounts and practical discussion exercises. Hypothetical scenes are identified in the text. Independent expert review is pending. Consult current local instructions for an actual emergency.

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# The region in the dark

The August 2003 blackout affected a broad area of the northeastern United States and southern Canada. The US-Canada investigation described an estimated 50 million people affected and examined a sequence of technical and organizational failures. Its value lies partly in refusing a simple explanation for a complex interruption. Department of Energy Joint investigation

A household does not experience the investigation first. It notices a stopped appliance, a dark room, a failed payment, or a lift that cannot be used. The cause may be regional, but the consequences arrive through intimate routines. Someone needs a meal. Someone has to reach a child. Someone cannot miss an overnight medical treatment.

The plan in this book begins with those routines. It then follows the links outward to buildings, businesses, utilities, and the wider region. The aim is to make the first decisions possible even before a full explanation becomes available.

# The light switch inventory

Choose an ordinary hour of your day. Write down what you do. Then identify which actions use electricity directly and which depend on another powered service. A person may have a charged phone while the network or a remote service is unavailable. A store may have goods while its payment system cannot process a purchase.

This is a hypothetical planning method. Try it with three people and compare the answers. The person who uses a lift, refrigerated medicine, or a communication aid may identify a dependency the others never noticed. Let that person explain what assistance is useful. Do not substitute a general kit list for their actual requirements.

The Red Cross outage guidance recommends preparing for interrupted power and its effects on household needs. It is a starting point for discussions with equipment providers, care teams, and building management. Red Cross outage guidance

# The first evening

Imagine a household after an afternoon interruption. This scene is an exercise. One person wants to open the refrigerator to choose dinner. Another is searching for an estimate. A third remembers that the building's entry arrangement uses power. A short written list can prevent the conversation from repeating without producing action.

Write the outage time. Check for immediate hazards. Confirm who needs assistance. Establish a credible information source. Agree on the next check-in. These actions are proposed ways to organize attention. Adapt them to the actual household and follow local emergency instructions.

Food decisions have a clock. FoodSafety.gov advises that a refrigerator will keep food safe for up to four hours during an outage if kept closed, and that refrigerated perishables should be discarded after four hours without power. It advises against tasting food to establish safety. Consult its item-specific chart for the actual food involved. FoodSafety.gov

That makes a ready-to-eat meal useful. It reduces repeated refrigerator opening and removes the need to improvise cooking. Choose food people can eat comfortably, check dietary needs, and keep the necessary manual opener available.

# The dangerous substitute

The absence of normal heat or electricity can encourage improvised substitutes. Some create a more immediate danger than the outage. CDC warns that generators and other fuel-burning equipment can produce lethal carbon monoxide. It instructs people to keep generators outdoors at least 20 feet from doors, windows, and vents, and to use battery-backed carbon monoxide detection. A garage with an open door is not an appropriate indoor operating location. CDC

This is a subject to discuss before borrowing equipment. A generous offer can arrive without the space, instructions, or safe connection arrangement needed to use it. Follow equipment instructions and qualified installation requirements. If a home cannot be used safely, a planned move to a suitable location may be the better response.

The same applies to extreme temperature. Decide with the people affected what would prompt relocation, where they could go, and how they would get there. A plan that waits for an exact restoration time can leave a time-sensitive need unresolved.

# The neighbor with the key

A check-in is an agreement, not a sentiment. Who makes the first contact? How? What happens if there is no answer? What assistance has the person asked for? A neighbor may want help carrying a bag or making a call. They may already have a support arrangement that should be respected.

The Red Cross planning guidance encourages communicating and allocating responsibilities beforehand. Put important contacts on paper. Agree on an out-of-area contact if that helps a separated household coordinate. Red Cross planning

Try an exercise with a guest. Ask them to find your flashlight from a spoken instruction. Then ask them to find the number they would use to contact your chosen relative. Every follow-up question identifies something you can make easier before the next interruption.

# Keeping work modest

A small organization should identify what must continue, what can pause, and who can authorize the pause. A worker with no functioning home connection needs an offline way to learn the expectation. A customer needs a reliable way to discover whether a service is operating.

For an IT team, a backup claim should include its duration, dependencies, and tested handover. A facility with backup power can still depend on people, communications, fuel arrangements, cooling, and services elsewhere. These are continuity questions for the responsible operators. Household readers do not need to operate the facility to ask whether a service they depend on has a credible plan.

Write one plain-language status template before an outage. Include the time, what is available, what has paused, and when the next update is expected. A modest promise kept is more useful than an optimistic restoration claim repeated without evidence.

## The inquiry after the outage

The joint US-Canada investigation into the 2003 event examined both physical events and organizational performance. The Department of Energy's later implementation account identifies failures to comply with voluntary reliability standards as a significant contributing factor and notes that some causes had appeared in earlier blackouts. The issue included whether known lessons had become effective practice. DOE implementation account

This is an important kind of disaster knowledge. An inquiry can identify a weakness. A recommendation can be published. Neither action proves that the weakness has been corrected. Implementation needs responsibility, verification, and continued attention after the event has left the headlines.

Households encounter a small version of this problem. Everyone agrees to replace the flashlight batteries, but nobody owns the task. A business agrees that its emergency contacts need updating, but the document remains unchanged. The lesson has been spoken without becoming a reliable arrangement.

At the end of a rehearsal, assign one task to one person with a date. Then check that the result works for someone else. A completed contact sheet that a colleague can find has crossed a threshold a meeting note has not. The scale is different from a regional reliability program, but the implementation question is recognizable.

# The service counter

Imagine a small business during a regional interruption. This is a hypothetical exercise. It can answer calls intermittently, cannot take electronic payments, and has limited access to records. Customers still need to know whether to travel there. Staff still need to know whether to report for a shift.

Write the message the business should issue. State what is available, what is paused, how customers can make contact, and when the next update is expected. Avoid a restoration promise that the business cannot support. The message should remain understandable when copied into a text or read aloud.

Now ask where the message can be published if the usual system is unavailable. A fallback that depends on the same lost account or network

is incomplete. Ask the responsible service owner what options are available, and keep access appropriately controlled. An emergency should not become an excuse to distribute sensitive credentials casually.

Finally, identify who needs a direct call. A general notice may be insufficient for a person depending on an appointment, a delivery, or an accessibility arrangement. Continuity includes the communication required to prevent someone from arriving at a dark building with no workable alternative.

# The last battery is a conversation

A charging plan can expose household priorities without a major purchase. Put the devices on a table in a hypothetical exercise. Ask what each one supports and what would happen if it became unavailable. A phone may provide entertainment for one person and a communication aid for another. An apparently equal allocation can miss that difference.

Agree on priorities with the people affected. Identify which device has a safe substitute and which needs a care-provider discussion. Then consider how the plan changes overnight or after a day away from home. The answer may be a relocation arrangement rather than a larger battery.

This approach helps avoid the trap of collecting equipment before defining the requirement. A product's advertised capacity does not establish how long it will support a particular medical device or household setup. That question belongs with the equipment instructions and qualified provider.

The exercise ends with a practical agreement. Someone knows what must remain available, someone knows whom to call, and the household has a trigger for changing its plan. The light switch has become part of a wider account of how people care for one another.

# The uneven return

Electricity may return before every other service. The home may have light while an online system remains unavailable or a water advisory remains in effect. Review each dependency through its own responsible source. Assess food using actual time and temperature guidance.

Finally, replace what you used and correct what confused people. The record should be short enough that someone will read it. A flashlight location, a care-provider contact, and a relocation destination can be more valuable than a long report that remains unopened.

The companion 24-card deck expands the original six-card exercise into communication, food, accessibility, health dependencies, safe substitutes, work, and recovery. Historical statements concern August 2003. Household and workplace scenes are hypothetical. Sources were checked on November 16, 2026. Local authorities, utilities, care providers, and equipment instructions supply the operational guidance for an actual interruption.