

# Iron Heroes- Arcanist- Stress Tokens, Take 2

by Mike "Mac"

*Note: What has changed:*

*Adjusted how stress tokens and strain were earned, based on suggestions from Kreistor1 and IronSnow on the IH message boards.*

*Changed how Strain was removed, based on suggestions from IronSnow.*

*Removed some of the Expanded Actions.*

*Added a Glossary, for ease of reference.*

First, I would like to thank everyone else on the Arcanist Wiki who has posted thus far. I would never have had my ideas if I had not read all of these excellent systems beforehand. Standing on the shoulders of giants, so to speak.

I was particularly interested in Soulmage's system and how it emphasized strain from casting. The best part about it is that it avoids any kind of "Spells per Day" or "Mana Points" mechanic and still stays balanced, so we don't have mages casting unlimited fireballs and ruining the game for everyone else. I had already been thinking of some sort of flexible spell-buying system like many of the other systems posted here, and I began to consider how I would like to see this strain mechanic developed in my system.

Rather than be a one-shot comeuppance for failing a casting check, I began to think of strain as an accumulated effect from spellcasting. Essentially strain would accumulate as you cast spells, dissipate as you are at rest, etc. Strain in this case would be represented mechanically as an increased difficulty class for the spell in question. A spell with a normal casting DC of 20 would instead have a DC of, say, 22, if you had cast spells in the previous two rounds. This increased difficulty means that the likelihood of a disastrous casting increases if you are already casting a lot of spells.

Of course, notating this mechanic on paper would be cumbersome. Your strain modifier would be changing every round, and after a few encounters you would erase right through your character sheet. I needed some other way to represent this constantly fluctuating modifier.

By now you ought to see where I am going with this. This is essentially the same logic behind using token pools in Iron Heroes. This was great. I get what I needed, and I get to use a system that fans of Iron Heroes are already familiar with.

## **The Mechanics of Stress Tokens**

First, a couple of clarifications: From now on *stress* refers to the tokens one accumulates while spellcasting, and *strain* refers to the negative consequences of failing a casting roll. Also, I refer throughout to the spell DC, the casting DC, and the casting check. Though this system is flexible

enough to apply to any of the systems described in this Wiki, these terms should be adopted into whatever system you use. The *spell DC* refers to the difficulty class to cast the spell in question. The *casting check* is the roll made to see if the Arcanist beats the spell DC. If he is successful, the *casting DC* refers to the result of the casting check.

Second, the stress pool works rather differently than the other token pools used in Iron Heroes. The other token pools work by giving a reward for behaving in a way appropriate to your class. The stress pool is basically a cost one accrues for spellcasting. It is a penalty, not a bonus. While other classes wish to build their token pools, the Arcanist would prefer to keep it as empty as possible.

Casting a spell requires a full-round action and a casting check that meets a spell DC equal to the spell's base DC + the number of tokens in one's stress pool. The Arcanist accumulates stress tokens according to the table below.

<b>Check Result</b>	<b>Stress and Strain Gained</b>
Succeeds by 15 or more.	Spell succeeds, casting is effortless, no stress
Succeeds by 7 to 14.	Spell succeeds, casting is somewhat difficult, caster earns one stress token.
Succeeds by 0 to 6.	Spell succeeds, but just barely, caster earns two stress tokens.
Fails by 1 to 7.	Spell fails, but not disastrously, no stress or strain.
Fails by 8-15.	Spell fails, the caster tires from the effort, one level of strain applies.
Fails by 16 or more.	Spell fails, caster becomes winded and frustrated, one level of strain applies, caster earns one stress token.

In addition, the Arcanist may accept additional Stress tokens to gain the following benefits.

<b>Action</b>	<b>Stress Tokens Gained</b>
Cast as a Standard Action	+2
For each other spell effect active	+2
Eschew Concentration	+4
Loading a spell	+1/DC increase

These actions will be explained below. In general, the spell DC increases or decreases from tokens apply to the round after they are earned or lost.

In addition, the Arcanist who suffers strain for the first time takes a -2 penalty to his spellcasting ability score (Int, Wis, or Cha) and becomes *fatigued* as described on p. 301 of the *DMG* and p. 212 of *IH* (-2 Str and Dex, cannot run or charge). If while under strain he fails a second time, his Strength, Dexterity, and spellcasting ability score are reduced to -4. If it happens a third time, his spellcasting ability score is reduced to -6, and he is *exhausted* (-6 to Str and Dex, moves at half speed). Each additional instance of strain after that causes an additional -2 penalty to the Arcanist's Strength, Dexterity, and spellcasting ability score, until the Arcanist is incapacitated or until he recovers from strain. The Arcanist recovers from strain by reducing his stress pool to zero, essentially by not casting any spells for a while.

These penalties differ from more mundane fatigue and exhaustion in one key way: Actions that would lead a normally fatigued character to become exhausted, or an exhausted character to become unconscious, do not impede the magically fatigued or exhausted Arcanist. He can still act as normal, though the various penalties make these actions more difficult, and he can only become exhausted or unconscious from continually failing to cast.

## **Expanded Casting Actions**

What follows is an explanation of other actions that can gain stress tokens. Usually the Arcanist is adding some extra power to his spell in exchange for his ability to cast future spells.

*Casting a Spell as a Standard Action* should be self-explanatory. The Arcanist incurs stress from trying to rush the spell.

Having *Multiple Spells Active* is also very stressful on the Arcanist.

*Eschewing Concentration* means that you can earn stress tokens in place of having to make a Concentration check when you would normally be required to do so to maintain a spell. You can choose to apply these stress tokens after failing the Concentration check, if you wish.

*Loading a Spell* means that you increase the caster DC of your spell by gaining stress tokens. It is a way of overcoming spell or energy resistance, or opposed casting checks, or high saving throws. Unlike other actions that gain stress tokens, this action increases the spell DC the round it is used; The Arcanist artificially increases his caster DC for that round in exchange for a higher spell DC. Otherwise we would have a very broken system where the munchkin Arcanist is constantly gaining stress tokens to make up for the stress tokens he gained from the previous

round.

An example of loading a spell is in order. Malacot the Arcanist needs to overcome the spell resistance of a particularly powerful monster. Let us say the monster has SR 24. Normally, Malacot's check for his lightning attack spell can at best be as high as 28. Since the spell DC itself is fairly low, let us say DC 12, Malacot decides to hedge his chance of success and load his spell by gaining 4 stress tokens. The modified spell DC is now 16, which he beats. Adding the bonus gained by loading the spell, Malacot's caster check is 25. It normally would have been 21 and failed to pass the monster's spell resistance, but since he loaded the spell he was successful. The next round, he has 6 stress tokens, 2 from beating the spell DC by less than 7, and 4 from loading the spell, and they both apply to the spell DC for the round. He does not get another bonus to his caster DC unless he loads his spell again, as above. Note that Malacot gains stress tokens based on the newly modified spell DC.

## **Removing Stress and Strain**

As long as you are not casting a spell, you can take a standard action to remove one stress token per round. Additionally, you can make a Concentration check to try to remove two stress tokens per round. The DC for the check is  $10 +$  the number of stress tokens, if the check takes a full-round action, and  $15 +$  the number of stress tokens, if it takes a standard action. You can also remove more stress tokens per round by increasing the DC  $+2$  for each additional stress token removed. You must decide how many stress tokens you are attempting to remove, and whether the check is a full-round or standard action, before making the Concentration check. Again, you can never cast a spell and attempt to remove stress in the same round.

Essentially, the penalties for strain disappear when you lose all your stress tokens. However, it takes the same effort to remove the effects of magical fatigue and exhaustion as it does normal fatigue and exhaustion. That is, it takes a full hour's rest to remove the penalties from magical exhaustion, including the penalty to the Arcanist's casting ability. After that the Arcanist is still magically fatigued. It takes a full eight hour's rest to remove the penalties of magical fatigue, including the penalty to the Arcanist's casting ability.

## **Other Considerations**

Let me reiterate that this system can easily be tacked on to any of the other Arcanist variations posted on this Wiki, or any other modular magic system, such as Elements of Magic. It is to be used in place of any kind of magic-point mechanic, but other than that the system would remain unchanged. You may need to adjust the number of stress tokens that are earned based on how expensive the spells are in the system you use.

Because caster DCs are the result of caster checks, any time one Arcanist spell goes up against another, such as dispelling an Abjuration spell, it is essentially an opposed check. It is therefore very important to record the result of your caster check if the spell lasts longer than one round.

Failure to overcome an opposed caster check or spell or energy resistance does not constitute an instance of strain: only failure to overcome the spell DC in question by 8 or more causes strain.

There is no reason that the Arcanist could not use any one of the three mental abilities to as his

spellcasting ability. The Arcanist could pick one at first level based on his approach to magic: Intelligence for study and practice, Wisdom for extra-personal devotion, and Charisma for natural aptitude. This decision could be strictly cosmetic, or it could affect what types of magic the Arcanist has access to.

If something seems unbalanced, or if clarification is otherwise required, please feel free to respond in the IH message boards.

## Glossary

*Casting check:* The check the Arcanist makes to see if he can cast a spell. The DC is the spell DC + the number of stress tokens incurred.

*Casting DC:* The result of the casting check. For opposed casting checks, this casting DC becomes the spell DC for the other caster. It is also used to determine whether the Arcanist bypasses energy or spell resistance.

*Loading:* A method to artificially increase the casting DC in exchange for greater stress. It is useful for overcoming very high energy and spell resistance, as well as for beating opposed casting checks.

*Magical Exhaustion:* A condition a particularly overzealous Arcanist may find himself in. Magical exhaustion inflicts a -6 penalty to the Arcanist's Strength and Dexterity scores, as well as to his casting ability (Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma). The Arcanist cannot run or charge, just like with magical fatigue. He is otherwise unrestricted in his actions.

After one hour of rest, the magically exhausted Arcanist becomes magically fatigued.

*Magical Fatigue:* A condition an Arcanist suffers when overreaching his casting abilities. Magical fatigue inflicts a -2 penalty to the Arcanist's Strength and Dexterity scores, as well as to his casting ability (Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma). The Arcanist cannot run or charge, but is otherwise unrestricted in his actions.

It takes eight hours of rest to remove the penalties from magical fatigue.

*Spell DC:* The base difficulty for casting a spell, without taking stress penalties into account. The spell DC could be determined in any number of ways, depending on the specifics of the magic system in use.

*Stress:* A measure of how casting certain spells makes it more difficult to cast further spells. Stress is measured in *Stress Tokens*, which are similar to other tokens earned in Iron Heroes, with the main difference being that they are punitive and not desirable. Stress tokens increase the DC for the casting check of any given spell.

*Strain:* A measure of how failing to cast certain spells can be physically and psychologically damaging to the Arcanist. When strain occurs, the Arcanist can experience ability damage, magical fatigue, or magical exhaustion.

*posted by Mike "Mac" Nigh.*

*This file can be found at <http://ironheroesarcana.pbwiki.com/>*