

# A Tip for Technical People

- Brad Connaster

I've mentioned this tip many times, but it is worth repeating. The number 1 problem with technical prose is its density. Technical people like to stack technical words, one atop another, creating a string known as a "portmanteau," which means "A large leather suitcase that opens into two hinged compartments." When you pack things into this suitcase, you squeeze out the little words that help the reader understand the relationship between words--little words such as "of," "in," and "for." These little words are called connectives, and they are very important for fluid reading. Here's an example of a portmanteau that I recently encountered:

on-site mechanical fabrication detailed electrical interconnections

There are some words missing here, words that would help me to understand this otherwise impenetrable string. The author can no doubt untangle this string, but the reader can't (neither can the editor). So, the next time you set fingers to keyboard to write a report, remember to not pack your suitcases too tightly.

By the way, here's my guess for unpacking the example portmanteau:

detailed [diagram] [of] electrical interconnects [for] on-site fabrication [equipment]

## —FOR NERDS ONLY—

Why are these little connectives so important? Because of something called phrase collapsing. You may have heard of "the magic number 7, plus or minus 2." It's the reason that we have 7-digit phone numbers. A man named Miller reviewed a ton of experiments on short-term memory and found an interesting common thread:

Most indicated a limit of 7 chunks of information, on average, that short-term memory is able to keep in an active state. That is the limit when we concentrate and try to remember things. However, when we read, our goal is not to memorize things but to make sense of things. Therefore, we have to leave a little space for processing in our short-term memories. When we encounter a string such as "on-site mechanical fabrication detailed electrical interconnections," we have six terms to deal with--six seemingly unrelated terms. So we stop, trying to decipher the cipher.

However, when we include the connectives, we enable short-term memory to collapse phrases into chunks of meaning.

For example, if we re-write our example string as "detailed diagram of electrical interconnects for on-site fabrication equipment"--as inelegant as it sounds--we end up with one manageable chunk of meaning. "detailed diagram" collapses to form one chunk (A), which combines with "electrical interconnects" to form a chunk of meaning (A+B). "on-site fabrication equipment" collapse to form a chunk (C), which combines with (A+B) to form one main chunk ([A+B]+C). What is really important to remember is the role of the connectives in phrase collapsing. The connectives are notated by the plus character (+). Without them, we cannot collapse phrases because we have no phrases to collapse. We simply have a string of words that the reader has to work through to create some sort of meaning (the reader will more likely skip this string than bear down upon it).

There are all sorts of phrases in our linguistic world. Noun phrases, verbal phrases, prepositional phrases, absolute phrases, subordinate phrases--any "sequence of grammatically related words without a subject and a predicate." So when you write, remember this consonance: The phrase is our friend. ★

## STC's Web Site: The Next Generation

STC's Web site is undergoing a complete redesign using CSS (cascading style sheet) layout techniques, which allow Web designers to update content without changing a site's formatting. STC's webmaster will be able to control the entire redesigned site with a single style sheet, resulting in timelier updates, greater readability, enhanced navigation, and reduced page size. Work on the new site should be completed early in the new year.

Due to the redesign, many URLs on the STC site will change. In late December, the STC office e-mailed to chapter webmasters a list of the most heavily visited pages whose URLs will change.

The new site will be 100 percent compliant with the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) standards for CSS. (Please visit the W3C Web site for more information about the organization.) Because screen readers can more easily interpret standards-compliant sites, users with disabilities will enjoy greater access to information on STC's new site. ★