
THE STANDARD HANDBOOK FOR AERONAUTICAL AND ASTRONAUTICAL ENGINEERS

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CONTENTS

List of Contributors xxi

Preface xxv

Section 1. New Vision for Future Aerospace Vehicles and Systems 1.1

- 1.1. Learning from Living Systems / 1.1
- 1.2. Revolutionary Vehicles / 1.3
- 1.3. Future Space Transportation / 1.6
- 1.4. Future Airspace System / 1.7
- 1.5. Needed: Intellectual Infrastructure / 1.11
- 1.6. Smart Vehicle, Heal Thyself / 1.12
- 1.7. Working for More Secure Airspace / 1.14

Section 2. Engineering Mathematics, Units, Symbols, and Constants 2.1

Part 1. Trigonometric Functions and General Formulae

- 2.1. Mathematical Signs and Symbols / 2.2
- 2.2. Trigonometric Formulae / 2.4
- 2.3. Trigonometric Values / 2.5
- 2.4. Approximations for Small Angles / 2.6
- 2.5. Solution of Triangles / 2.6
- 2.6. Spherical Triangle / 2.7
- 2.7. Exponential Form / 2.7
- 2.8. De Moivre's Theorem / 2.7
- 2.9. Euler's Relation / 2.7
- 2.10. Hyperbolic Functions / 2.7
- 2.11. Complex Variable / 2.8
- 2.12. Cauchy–Riemann Equations / 2.9
- 2.13. Cauchy's Theorem / 2.9
- 2.14. Zeroes, Poles, and Residues / 2.9
- 2.15. Some Standard Forms / 2.10
- 2.16. Coordinate Systems / 2.10
- 2.17. Transformation of Integrals / 2.11
- 2.18. Laplace's Equation / 2.11
- 2.19. Solution of Equations / 2.12
- 2.20. Method of Least Squares / 2.14

Part 2. Calculus

- 2.21. Derivative / 2.16
- 2.22. Maxima and Minima / 2.16
- 2.23. Integral / 2.17
- 2.24. Derivatives and Integrals / 2.18

- 2.25. Standard Substitutions / 2.19
- 2.26. Reduction Formulae / 2.19
- 2.27. Numerical Integration / 2.20
- 2.28. Vector Calculus / 2.21

Part 3. Series and Transforms

- 2.29. Arithmetic Series / 2.23
- 2.30. Geometric Series / 2.23
- 2.31. Binomial Series / 2.23
- 2.32. Taylor's Series / 2.23
- 2.33. Maclaurin's Series / 2.24
- 2.34. Laurent's Series / 2.24
- 2.35. Power Series for Real Variables / 2.24
- 2.36. Integer Series / 2.25
- 2.37. Fourier Series / 2.25
- 2.38. Rectified Sine Wave / 2.26
- 2.39. Square Wave / 2.26
- 2.40. Triangular Wave / 2.27
- 2.41. Sawtooth Wave / 2.27
- 2.42. Pulse Wave / 2.27
- 2.43. Fourier Transforms / 2.27
- 2.44. Laplace Transforms / 2.29

Part 4. Matrices and Determinants

- 2.45. Linear Simultaneous Equations / 2.30
- 2.46. Matrix Arithmetic / 2.30
- 2.47. Eigenvalues and Eigenvectors / 2.31
- 2.48. Coordinate Transformation / 2.32
- 2.49. Determinants / 2.32
- 2.50. Properties of Determinants / 2.33
- 2.51. Numerical Solution of Linear Equations / 2.33

Part 5. Differential Equations

- 2.52. Notation and Definitions / 2.35
- 2.53. Ordinary Differential Equations: Analytical Solutions / 2.36
- 2.54. Ordinary Differential Equations: Approximate Solutions / 2.40
- 2.55. Partial Differential Equations / 2.45

Part 6. Statistics

- 2.56. Introduction / 2.52
- 2.57. Averages / 2.52
- 2.58. Dispersion / 2.53
- 2.59. Skewness / 2.54
- 2.60. Combinations and Permutations / 2.55
- 2.61. Regression and Correlation / 2.56
- 2.62. Probability / 2.58
- 2.63. Probability Distributions / 2.59
- 2.64. Sampling / 2.63
- 2.65. Tests of Significance / 2.65

Part 7. SI Units

- 2.66. Derived Units / 2.69
- 2.67. Gravitational and Absolute Systems / 2.69
- 2.68. Expressing Magnitudes of SI Units / 2.70
- 2.69. Rules for Use of SI Units and the Decimal Multiples and Submultiples / 2.70
- 2.70. SI Quantities, Units, and Symbols / 2.71

Part 8. Conversion of Existing Imperial Terms**Part 9. Abbreviations****Part 10. Physical and Chemical Constants**

- 2.71. Atomic Number / 2.95
- 2.72. Atomic Weight / 2.95
- 2.73. Density / 2.95
- 2.74. Melting Point / 2.95
- 2.75. Linear Coefficient of Expansion / 2.95
- 2.76. Heat Conductivity / 2.101
- 2.77. Electrical Resistivity / 2.101

Section 3. Mechanical Engineering Principles**3.1****Part 1. Statics of Rigid Bodies****Part 2. Strength of Materials****Part 3. Dynamics of Rigid Bodies**

- 3.1. Basic Definitions / 3.7
- 3.2. Linear and Angular Motion in Two Dimensions / 3.9
- 3.3. Circular Motion / 3.11
- 3.4. Linear and Angular Motion in Three Dimensions / 3.12
- 3.5. Balancing / 3.14
- 3.6. Balancing of Rotating Masses / 3.14

Part 4. Vibrations

- 3.7. Single-Degree-of-Freedom Systems / 3.18
- 3.8. Multi-Degree-of-Freedom Systems / 3.29
- 3.9. Random Vibrations / 3.31

Part 5. Mechanics of Fluids

- 3.10. Introduction / 3.39
- 3.11. Fluid Statics / 3.39
- 3.12. Fluid Flow / 3.43
- 3.13. Flow Measurement / 3.52
- 3.14. Boundary Layer Flow / 3.54
- 3.15. Pressure Transients / 3.58
- 3.16. Gas Flow / 3.60
- 3.17. Ideal Fluid Flow / 3.65
- 3.18. Conclusion / 3.69

Part 6. Principles of Thermodynamics

- 3.19. Introduction / 3.70
- 3.20. The Laws of Thermodynamics / 3.70
- 3.21. Thermoeconomics / 3.72
- 3.22. Work, Heat, Property Values, Process Laws and Combustion / 3.73
- 3.23. Cycle Analysis / 3.74

Part 7. Heat Transfer

- 3.24. Introduction / 3.80
- 3.25. Basic Principles of Heat Transfer / 3.80
- 3.26. Analysis of Heat Transfer / 3.87
- 3.27. Use of Computers / 3.98
- 3.28. Heat Transfer: Nomenclature / 3.99

Section 4. Electrical and Electronic Principles**4.1**

- 4.1. Basic Electrical Technology / 4.1
- 4.2. Electrical Machines / 4.30
- 4.3. Analog and Digital Electronics Theory / 4.69
- 4.4. Electrical Safety / 4.114

Section 5. Computing**5.1**

- 5.1. Introduction / 5.1
- 5.2. Generations of Digital Computers / 5.1
- 5.3. Digital Computer Systems / 5.3
- 5.4. Categories of Computer Systems / 5.5
- 5.5. Central Processor Unit / 5.7
- 5.6. Memory / 5.14
- 5.7. Peripherals / 5.22
- 5.8. Output Devices / 5.23
- 5.9. Terminals / 5.24
- 5.10. Printers and Plotters / 5.25
- 5.11. Direct Input / 5.28
- 5.12. Secondary Storage / 5.29
- 5.13. Digital and Analog Input/Output / 5.35
- 5.14. Data Communications / 5.37
- 5.15. Computer Networks / 5.50
- 5.16. Internet / 5.58
- 5.17. Software / 5.60
- 5.18. Database Management / 5.66
- 5.19. Language Translators / 5.69
- 5.20. Languages / 5.71

Section 6. Microprocessors, Instrumentation, and Control**6.1****Part 1. Summary of Number Systems**

- 6.1. ASCII Code / 6.3
- 6.2. Gray Code / 6.4

Part 2. Microprocessors

- 6.3. System Architecture / 6.5
- 6.4. Bus Structure / 6.6
- 6.5. Memory Devices / 6.6
- 6.6. Input/Output (I/O) Structure / 6.7
- 6.7. Memory Map / 6.9

Part 3. Communication Standards

- 6.8. Serial Communication / 6.11
- 6.9. Parallel Communication / 6.12

Part 4. Interfacing of Computers to Systems

- 6.10. Digital Interfacing / 6.14
- 6.11. Controller Output Interface Hardware / 6.16
- 6.12. Analog Interfacing / 6.21
- 6.13. Multiplexing / 6.26
- 6.14. Machine Tool Interfaces / 6.28

- 6.15. Robot Control Interfaces / 6.29
- 6.16. Signal Conditioning / 6.31
- 6.17. Analog and Digital Filtering / 6.34

Part 5. Instrumentation

- 6.18. Introduction / 6.37
- 6.19. Dimensional/Geometrical Measurements / 6.40
- 6.20. Volume and Level / 6.48
- 6.21. Measurement of Vibration / 6.50
- 6.22. Force/Weight Measurement / 6.51
- 6.23. Pressure / 6.53
- 6.24. Flow / 6.55
- 6.25. Temperature Measurement / 6.59
- 6.26. Bar Code Readers / 6.67

Part 6. Classical Control Theory and Practice

- 6.27. Introduction / 6.69
- 6.28. Mathematical Models of Systems—Time Domain Analysis / 6.75
- 6.29. Laplace Notation for Differential Equations—Frequency-Domain Analysis / 6.80
- 6.30. Stability Criteria / 6.83
- 6.31. Control Strategies / 6.89

Part 7. Microprocessor-Based Control

- 6.32. Direct Digital Control / 6.109
- 6.33. Hardware Requirements / 6.110
- 6.34. Software Considerations / 6.111
- 6.35. Sampling Frequency in Digital Control Loops / 6.114
- 6.36. PID Digital Control Algorithm / 6.115
- 6.37. Speed Control / 6.117
- 6.38. The PC as a Controller / 6.119

Part 8. Programmable Logic Controllers

- 6.39. The PLC in Automation Systems / 6.122
- 6.40. The PLC Versus the Microcomputer / 6.123
- 6.41. Ladder Logic Programming / 6.125
- 6.42. Controlling Pneumatic and Hydraulic Systems / 6.129
- 6.43. Safety / 6.131
- 6.44. Networking of PLCs / 6.131

Part 9. The z-Transform

- 6.45. Representation of Discretely Sampled Data / 6.134
- 6.46. The z-Transform of a Closed-Loop System / 6.138
- 6.47. Proportional Control Using Digital Techniques / 6.141
- 6.48. The z-Transform for a PID Controller / 6.142
- 6.49. A P + I Strategy Using Digital Techniques / 6.143
- 6.50. Stability in Discrete Time Systems / 6.145

Part 10. State Variable Techniques

- 6.51. State Variable Representation of Systems / 6.146
- 6.52. Application to a First-Order System with A P + I Controller / 6.150
- 6.53. Application to a Second-Order System with A P + I Controller / 6.151
- 6.54. Nonlinear System Elements (Method of Isoclines) / 6.153
- 6.55. Sampled-Data Systems / 6.161
- 6.56. State Variable Transformations / 6.163
- 6.57. The State of Transition Matrix / 6.166

Section 7. Aeronautical Propulsion**7.1**

- 7.1. Newton and Propulsion / 7.1
- 7.2. Turbojets and Propellers / 7.2
- 7.3. Thrust Equation / 7.3
- 7.4. Engine Cycles / 7.4
- 7.5. Gas Turbine Engines / 7.7
- 7.6. Ideal Engine Cycle Analysis / 7.7
- 7.7. Goals of Cycle Analysis / 7.9
- 7.8. General Procedure for Cycle Analysis / 7.10
- 7.9. The Turbojet / 7.12
- 7.10. The Turbofan / 7.16
- 7.11. The Turboprop / 7.18
- 7.12. Gas Turbine Component Technology / 7.21
- 7.13. Real Gas Properties / 7.28
- 7.14. Ramjets and Scramjets / 7.28
- 7.15. Reciprocating Engines / 7.33
- 7.16. Aircraft Engine Emissions and Fuels / 7.37
- 7.17. Engine Noise / 7.39

Section 8. Rockets and Launch Vehicles**8.1**

- 8.1. Rocket Science / 8.1
- 8.2. Propulsion Systems / 8.22
- 8.3. Launch Vehicles / 8.43

Section 9. Aerospace Structures**9.1****Part 1. Aircraft Loadings****Part 2. Properties of Materials**

- 9.1. Metals / 9.6
- 9.2. Composites / 9.12
- 9.3. Smart Materials / 9.13

Part 3. Structural Considerations

- 9.4. Structural Analysis / 9.15
- 9.5. Finite Element Analysis / 9.17
- 9.6. Beams / 9.19
- 9.7. Tubes / 9.24
- 9.8. Plates and Shells / 9.26
- 9.9. Real Structures / 9.31
- 9.10. Stress Concentrations / 9.38
- 9.11. Composite Structures / 9.39
- 9.12. Structural Tests / 9.41

Part 4. Structural Dynamics

- 9.13. Introduction / 9.44
- 9.14. Multiple Degree of Freedom Vibration / 9.44
- 9.15. MDOF Free Vibration—Lumped Mass Models / 9.44
- 9.16. Setting Up Equations of Motion—Finite-Element Approach / 9.46
- 9.17. Global Stiffness and Mass Matrices—Element Assembly / 9.47
- 9.18. MDOF Vibration—Setting Up Equations of Motion—Rayleigh-Ritz Method / 9.48

- 9.19. Aeroelasticity / 9.56
- 9.20. Noise / 9.61
- 9.21. Helicopters / 9.61
- 9.22. Aircraft Airworthiness Certification / 9.62
- 9.23. Aeroelastic Design / 9.64

Part 5. Spacecraft Structures

- 9.24. Role of Spacecraft Structures and Various Interfaces / 9.65
- 9.25. Mechanical Requirements / 9.67
- 9.26. Space Mission Environment and Mechanical Loads / 9.68
- 9.27. Project Overview: Successive Designs and Iterative Verification of Structural Requirements / 9.70
- 9.28. Analytical Evaluations / 9.71
- 9.29. Test Verification, Qualification, and Flight Acceptance / 9.72
- 9.30. Satellite Qualification and Flight Acceptance / 9.74
- 9.31. Materials and Processes / 9.75
- 9.32. Manufacturing of Spacecraft Structures / 9.77

Section 10. Aerodynamics, Performance and Stability and Control 10.1

- 10.1. Introduction / 10.1

Part 1. Aerodynamics

- 10.2. Airfoil Geometric and Aerodynamic Definitions / 10.5
- 10.3. Wing Geometric and Aerodynamic Definitions / 10.13
- 10.4. Fundamentals of Vector Fluid Dynamics / 10.16
- 10.5. Fundamentals of Potential Flow / 10.24
- 10.6. Elementary Boundary Layer Flow / 10.34
- 10.7. Incompressible Flow over Airfoils / 10.42
- 10.8. Incompressible Flow over Finite Wings / 10.63
- 10.9. Shock Wave Relationships / 10.76
- 10.10. Compressible Flow over Airfoils / 10.85
- 10.11. Compressible Flow over Finite Wings / 10.94

Part 2. Airplane Performance

- 10.12. Standard Atmosphere and Height Measurement / 10.108
- 10.13. Airspeed and Airspeed Measurement / 10.119
- 10.14. Drag and Drag Power (Power Required) / 10.122
- 10.15. Engine (Powerplant) Performance / 10.127
- 10.16. Level Flight Performance / 10.134
- 10.17. Climbing and Descending Flight / 10.138
- 10.18. Turning Performance / 10.146
- 10.19. Stall and Spin / 10.148
- 10.20. Range and Endurance / 10.150
- 10.21. Takeoff and Landing Performance / 10.156
- 10.22. Airplane Operations / 10.163

Part 3. Aircraft Stability and Control

- 10.23. Mathematical Modeling and Simulation of Fixed Wing Aircraft / 10.172
- 10.24. Development of the Linearized Equations of Motion / 10.179
- 10.25. Calculation of Aerodynamic Derivatives / 10.188
- 10.26. Aircraft Dynamic Stability / 10.191
- 10.27. Aircraft Response to Controls and Atmospheric Disturbances / 10.196

Section 11. Avionics and Astrionics**11.1****Part 1. The Electromagnetic Spectrum**

- 11.1. Radiowaves in the Vacuum / 11.2
- 11.2. Antennas and Power Budget of a Radio Link / 11.3
- 11.3. Radiowave Propagation in the Terrestrial Environment / 11.4
- 11.4. Management of the Electromagnetic Spectrum / 11.7

Part 2. The Spacecraft Environment

- 11.5. Introduction to the Space Environment / 11.9
- 11.6. Effects of the Space Environment on Spacecraft, Launchers and Airplanes / 11.10
- 11.7. The Energetic Charged Particle Environment / 11.13

Part 3. Aircraft Environment

- 11.8. Typical Flight Profile for Commercial Airplanes / 11.21
- 11.9. The Atmosphere / 11.23
- 11.10. Other Atmospheric Hazards / 11.31
- 11.11. The Ionosphere / 11.35

Part 4. Electromagnetic Compatibility

- 11.12. Introduction / 11.36
- 11.13. Background of EM Coupling / 11.37
- 11.14. EM Environment and EMC Standards / 11.40
- 11.15. EMC Tools / 11.42
- 11.16. Engineering Method / 11.45
- 11.17. Conclusion / 11.47

Part 5. Introduction to Radar

- 11.18. Historical Background / 11.49
- 11.19. Basic Principles / 11.49
- 11.20. Trends in Radar Technology / 11.55
- 11.21. Radar Applications to Aeronautics / 11.57
- 11.22. Overview of Military Requirements and Specific Developments / 11.59
- 11.23. Overview of Radar Applications to Space / 11.60

Part 6. Optical Fibers and Lasers

- 11.24. Optical Fiber Theory and Applications / 11.62
- 11.25. Lasers / 11.72
- 11.26. Specific Laser Systems / 11.81

Part 7. Photovoltaics

- 11.27. Solar Radiation / 11.86
- 11.28. Photovoltaic Cell / 11.86
- 11.29. The Solar Array / 11.88

Part 8. Aircraft Flight Control Systems

- 11.30. Foreword / 11.91
- 11.31. Flight Control Objectives and Principles / 11.91
- 11.32. Flight Control Systems Design / 11.97
- 11.33. Airbus Fly-by-Wire: An Example of Modern Flight Control / 11.105
- 11.34. Some Control Challenges / 11.118
- 11.35. Conclusion / 11.120

Part 9. Space Borne Instruments

- 11.36. Space Borne Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) / 11.123
- 11.37. Other Microwave Instruments / 11.129
- 11.38. Spacecraft Sensors and Instrumentation / 11.132
- 11.39. Spectro-Imagers / 11.141
- 11.40. Active Instrumentation: Space Lidars / 11.146
- 11.41. Passive Sounding from Space / 11.152

Part 10. In-Flight Computing

- 11.42. Introduction to Avionics / 11.156
- 11.43. Requirements for Avionics / 11.157
- 11.44. Physical Architecture / 11.159
- 11.45. Avionics Logical Architecture / 11.164
- 11.46. Avionics Example: The Airbus A320 Flight Control System / 11.169
- 11.47. Engineering of Avionics System / 11.172
- 11.48. Future Avionics / 11.175

Part 11. In-Space Computing

- 11.49. Introduction / 11.178
- 11.50. Physical Architectures of Avionics / 11.182
- 11.51. On-Board Software / 11.188
- 11.52. Development of Avionics System / 11.195
- 11.53. Advanced Development Methods / 11.203
- 11.54. Future Avionics Functions / 11.208

Section 12. Aircraft Systems**12.1**

- 12.1. Introduction / 12.1
- 12.2. Air Conditioning (ATA 21) / 12.19
- 12.3. Electrical Power (ATA 24) / 12.28
- 12.4. Equipment/Furnishings (ATA 25) / 12.35
- 12.5. Fire Protection (ATA 26) / 12.41
- 12.6. Flight Controls (ATA 27) / 12.50
- 12.7. Fuel (ATA 28) / 12.52
- 12.8. Hydraulic Power (ATA 29) / 12.59
- 12.9. Ice and Rain Protection (ATA 30) / 12.68
- 12.10. Landing Gear (ATA 32) / 12.81
- 12.11. Lights (ATA 33) / 12.82
- 12.12. Oxygen (ATA 35) / 12.84
- 12.13. Pneumatic (ATA 36) / 12.91
- 12.14. Water/Waste (ATA 38) / 12.97
- 12.15. Airborne Auxiliary Power (ATA 49) / 12.100
- 12.16. Avionic Systems / 12.102

Section 13. Aeronautical Design**13.1**

- 13.1. Definitions / 13.1
- 13.2. Introduction / 13.1
- 13.3. Overall Approach / 13.2
- 13.4. Government Regulations / 13.11
- 13.5. Conceptual Design / 13.18
- 13.6. Military Aircraft Design / 13.45

- 13.7. Commercial and Civil Aircraft Design / 13.49
- 13.8. Life Cycle Cost (LCC) / 13.49
- 13.9. Commercial Aircraft Operating Costs / 13.52
- 13.10. Unmanned Air Vehicles / 13.55
- 13.11. Lighter-than-Air Vehicles (LTA) / 13.56
- 13.12. V/Stol Air Vehicles / 13.62
- 13.13. Performance / 13.68

Section 14. Astrodynamics

14.1

- 14.1. Orbital Mechanics / 14.2
- 14.2. Orbital Maneuvers / 14.12
- 14.3. Earth Orbiting Satellites / 14.21
- 14.4. Interplanetary Missions / 14.33

Section 15. Spacecraft

15.1

Part 1. Introduction

Part 2. Platform Technologies

- 15.1. Spacecraft Structure / 15.4
- 15.2. Thermal Control / 15.7
- 15.3. Solar Cells / 15.8
- 15.4. Attitude Control / 15.9

Part 3. Launch and Reentry Vehicles

- 15.5. Semireusable Launch Vehicles / 15.11
- 15.6. Expendable Launch Vehicles (ELVs) / 15.15
- 15.7. Sounding Rockets / 15.16
- 15.8. Guns, Mass Drivers, Sled, Energy Beam-Assisted Vehicles, Parabolic Flight Aircraft, and Drop Towers / 15.17
- 15.9. Reentry Vehicles / 15.18

Part 4. Satellites

- 15.10. Communications Satellites / 15.24
- 15.11. Satellite Navigation / 15.25
- 15.12. Meteorology / 15.33
- 15.13. Earth Resources Satellites / 15.33
- 15.14. Military Satellites / 15.33
- 15.15. Satellite Instrument Packages / 15.34

Part 5. Orbital and Mission Spacecraft and Space Stations

- 15.16. Orbital Spacecraft / 15.37
- 15.17. Transfer and Supply Vehicles and Upper Stages / 15.39
- 15.18. Planetary Orbiters / 15.41
- 15.19. Planetary Landers / 15.43
- 15.20. Orbital Laboratories / 15.43
- 15.21. Space Stations / 15.44
- 15.22. Manned Interplanetary Spacecraft and Landers / 15.47
- 15.23. Manned Planetary Bases / 15.50

Part 6. Payload Management

- 15.24. Overview / 15.51
- 15.25. Planetary Mission Instrument Packages / 15.51

- 15.26. Space Laboratory Rack Systems / 15.58
- 15.27. Space Medicine Experiments / 15.60
- 15.28. Exposed Payloads / 15.61
- 15.29. Sounding Rocket Payloads / 15.61

Part 7. Human Factors

- 15.30. Substantive Overview / 15.62
- 15.31. Design Guidelines / 15.66
- 15.32. Discussion of Selected Human Factors Principles / 15.70
- 15.33. Health Care / 15.71

Part 8. Nutrition and Sanitation

Part 9. Space Suits

- 15.34. Pressure Suits / 15.96
- 15.35. EVA Suits / 15.98

Section 16. Earth's Environment and Space

16.1

Part 1. The Earth and Its Atmosphere

- 16.1. The Earth in Space / 16.2
- 16.2. Properties of the Earth's Atmosphere / 16.2
- 16.3. How the Earth's Atmosphere Works / 16.5
- 16.4. Atmosphere Dynamics and Atmosphere Models / 16.7
- 16.5. Electrical Phenomena in the Atmosphere / 16.11

Part 2. The Near-Earth Space Environment

- 16.6. Background / 16.13
- 16.7. The Plasma Environment / 16.14
- 16.8. The Neutral Gas Environment / 16.17
- 16.9. The Vacuum Environment / 16.19
- 16.10. The Radiation Environment / 16.19
- 16.11. The Micrometeoroid and Space Debris Environment / 16.22

Part 3. The Solar System

- 16.12. Physical Properties of the Planets / 16.24
- 16.13. Space Age Discoveries / 16.26

Part 4. The Moon

- 16.14. Origin of the Moon / 16.32
- 16.15. Orbital Parameters / 16.33
- 16.16. Lunar Geography / 16.35
- 16.17. Lunar Geology / 16.35
- 16.18. Physical Surface Properties / 16.38
- 16.19. Lunar Surface Environment / 16.45

Part 5. Mars

- 16.20. Orbital Characteristics / 16.51
- 16.21. Solid Geophysical Properties and Interiors / 16.51
- 16.22. Surface and Subsurface / 16.53
- 16.23. Atmosphere / 16.58
- 16.24. Satellites / 16.59
- 16.25. Search for Life on Mars / 16.60
- 16.26. Exploration / 16.61

Part 6. The Sun–Earth Connection

- 16.27. Introduction / 16.64
- 16.28. The Sun and the Heliosphere / 16.64
- 16.29. Structure and Dynamics of the Magnetospheric System / 16.67
- 16.30. The Solar–Terrestrial Energy Chain / 16.69
- 16.31. Dynamics of the Magnetosphere-Ionosphere-Atmosphere System / 16.70
- 16.32. Importance of Atmospheric Coupling / 16.74
- 16.33. Sun–Earth Connections and Human Technology / 16.76
- 16.34. Summary / 16.77

Part 7. Space Debris

- 16.35. Introduction / 16.79
- 16.36. Spatial Distribution of Space Debris / 16.82
- 16.37. The Collision Risk / 16.84
- 16.38. The Geostationary Orbit / 16.84
- 16.39. Long-Term Evolution of the Space Debris Environment and Mitigation Measures / 16.86

Section 17. Aircraft Safety

17.1

Part 1. Organizational Safety Program

- 17.1. Introduction / 17.2
- 17.2. Safety Concepts / 17.2
- 17.3. Accident Causation / 17.3
- 17.4. Principles of Safety Management / 17.5
- 17.5. The Accident-Prevention Process / 17.6
- 17.6. The Elements of an Organizational Safety Program / 17.8
- 17.7. Conclusion / 17.11

Part 2. Aviation Law

- 17.8. Introduction / 17.12
- 17.9. Federal Statutory Law / 17.12
- 17.10. State Codes / 17.12
- 17.11. Regulations / 17.12
- 17.12. The Common Law / 17.13
- 17.13. Industry Standards / 17.13
- 17.14. The Scope of Aviation Law / 17.14
- 17.15. FAA Enforcement Administrative Actions / 17.15
- 17.16. International Treaties/ICAO / 17.15
- 17.17. Aviation Business Disputes / 17.15
- 17.18. U.S. Federal Agencies that Regulate the Aviation Industry / 17.16
- 17.19. The Roles of an Aviation Safety Professional in Aviation Law / 17.17
- 17.20. FAA Regulatory Compliance / 17.17
- 17.21. Accident Investigation / 17.18
- 17.22. Litigation Support / 17.18
- 17.23. Litigation Avoidance (“Preventive Medicine”) / 17.18
- 17.24. The Engineer as a Technical Witness / 17.19
- 17.25. The Engineer as an Expert Witness / 17.19
- 17.26. The Engineer as Architect of Demonstrative Evidence / 17.19
- 17.27. Aviation Product Liability / 17.20
- 17.28. Conclusion / 17.25

Part 3. Accident Analysis Data

- 17.29. Zero Accidents: The Quest for Better Prevention / 17.28
- 17.30. Hazard Identification: The Pursuit of Information / 17.30
- 17.31. The Need for Data-Driven Processes / 17.32
- 17.32. Flight Operations Quality Assurance: The Pursuit of Knowledge / 17.32
- 17.33. Conclusion / 17.33

Part 4. Risk Management

- 17.34. Introduction / 17.35
- 17.35. Risk Management Guidelines / 17.35
- 17.36. The Risk Management Process / 17.35
- 17.37. Summary / 17.41

Part 5. Aircraft Accident and Incident Investigation

- 17.38. Introduction / 17.42
- 17.39. Why Investigate Accidents and Incidents? / 17.42
- 17.40. Systems Approach / 17.42
- 17.41. The Importance of Investigating Incidents / 17.45
- 17.42. Accident Investigation / 17.48
- 17.43. The Role of an Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineer in an Investigation / 17.50
- 17.44. Summary / 17.53

Section 18. Aircraft Maintenance**18.1****Part 1. The Economics of Maintenance**

- 18.1. Airplane Maintenance / 18.2
- 18.2. Design Service Objective (DSO) / 18.2
- 18.3. Airplane Aging and Maintenance Cost / 18.4
- 18.4. Airplane Functionality / 18.4
- 18.5. Total Operating Cost / 18.5
- 18.6. Direct Operating Cost / 18.6
- 18.7. Maintenance Cost / 18.6
- 18.8. Scheduled and Unscheduled Maintenance / 18.8
- 18.9. Maintenance Cost Comparison / 18.9
- 18.10. Turnaround Time (TAT) / 18.9
- 18.11. Passenger Yield / 18.9
- 18.12. Discretionary Maintenance / 18.10
- 18.13. High Cost of Airplane Components / 18.10
- 18.14. Component Reliability / 18.11
- 18.15. Schedule Reliability / 18.11
- 18.16. Fix or Fly? / 18.12
- 18.17. Economics of a Maintenance Event / 18.12
- 18.18. Maintenance Risk / 18.13
- 18.19. Airplane Lease (Dry Lease or Wet Lease?) / 18.14
- 18.20. In-House or Outsource? / 18.15
- 18.21. Power-by-the-Hour (PBH) / 18.15
- 18.22. Line Replaceable Unit (LRU) and Shop Replaceable Unit (SRU) / 18.16
- 18.23. Airplane Parts / 18.16
- 18.24. Summary / 18.18

Part 2. National and International Regulations

- 18.25. Background / 18.20
- 18.26. Federal Aviation Regulations (FAR) / 18.21
- 18.27. FAA Certification / 18.24

Part 3. Maintenance Programs

- 18.28. Airplane Maintenance / 18.28
- 18.29. Maintenance Program Requirements and the Historical Development of Aircraft Maintenance Theories / 18.29
- 18.30. Maintenance Steering Group—1 (MSG-1) Decision Logic / 18.30
- 18.31. Maintenance Steering Group—2 (MSG-2) Decision Logic / 18.30
- 18.32. Maintenance Steering Group—3 (MSG-3) Decision Logic / 18.31
- 18.33. Developing the Maintenance Program Proposal / 18.31
- 18.34. Operations Specifications / 18.32

Part 4. Aircraft Structural Corrosion

- 18.35. Introduction / 18.35
- 18.36. Thermodynamics of Corrosion / 18.35
- 18.37. Aircraft Materials / 18.37
- 18.38. Types of Aircraft Material Corrosion / 18.37

Part 5. Aerospace Paints and Protective Coatings

- 18.39. Inorganic Coatings / 18.45
- 18.40. Anodizing / 18.45
- 18.41. Chemical Conversion Coatings / 18.46
- 18.42. Plating / 18.47
- 18.43. Thermal Spray Coatings / 18.48
- 18.44. Organic Finishes / 18.49
- 18.45. Primers / 18.49
- 18.46. Topcoats / 18.49
- 18.47. Specialty Coatings / 18.50
- 18.48. Sealants / 18.50
- 18.49. Corrosion Inhibiting Compounds / 18.50
- 18.50. Changes Due to Environmental Regulations / 18.51
- 18.51. Maintenance / 18.51

Part 6. Airframe Maintenance

- 18.52. Introduction / 18.53
- 18.53. Maintaining Structural Safety / 18.53
- 18.54. Maintaining Aircraft Certified Damage Tolerance Using MSG-3 Process / 18.55
- 18.55. Structural Maintenance Program Development / 18.56
- 18.56. Rating Environmental Deterioration (EDR) / 18.57
- 18.57. Rating Fatigue Damage (FD) / 18.57
- 18.58. Impact of Combined Fatigue and Corrosion Damage / 18.58
- 18.59. Rating Accidental Damage (ADR) / 18.59
- 18.60. Use of EDR/ADR Systems / 18.60

Part 7. Engine Maintenance

- 18.61. Engine Condition Monitoring (ECM) / 18.63
- 18.62. Engine Condition Monitoring (ECM) Program / 18.64
- 18.63. Methods of Inspection / 18.64
- 18.64. Cleaning / 18.66
- 18.65. Crack Detection / 18.67
- 18.66. Shop Processes / 18.69
- 18.67. Balancing / 18.70
- 18.68. Testing / 18.71
- 18.69. Summary / 18.71

Part 8. Maintenance Human Factors

- 18.70. Preface / 18.72
- 18.71. Definition / 18.72
- 18.72. Human Factors Principles, Standards, and Tools / 18.73
- 18.73. Regulatory Requirements Regarding Maintenance Human Factors / 18.73
- 18.74. Maintenance Human Factors in Aircraft/Component Design / 18.74
- 18.75. Maintenance Human Factors in Maintenance Product Design / 18.76
- 18.76. Maintenance Human Factors in Aircraft Maintenance Program Applications / 18.77
- 18.77. Summary / 18.78

Part 9. Extended Twin Operations (ETOPS)

- 18.78. Introduction: What Is ETOPS? / 18.79
- 18.79. Maintenance Program Requirements for ETOPS / 18.79
- 18.80. Additional Requirements / 18.80
- 18.81. Comments about the ETOPS Maintenance Program / 18.81
- 18.82. ETOPS Maintenance on Non-ETOPS Airplanes / 18.81

Index follows Section 18

INSTRUMENTATION

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6.18 INTRODUCTION

Many aspects of aerospace engineering depend essentially on the ability to make measurements of relevant quantities. This is as true of measurements taken in flight as it is of research and development and manufacturing quality control. In some areas, such as nondestructive testing or experimental stress analysis, the techniques for making the measurements are linked so closely to the rest of the subject that they are better dealt with in their particular context. Here we consider the more general measurements encountered throughout the whole field and the instrumentation that makes them possible.

In later sections techniques are described under the headings of the quantities to be measured—sometimes referred to as measurands. First, it is useful to discuss topics that are of importance in many instrumentation systems.

Sometimes the process of measurement is a simple one, with the human operator playing a direct part: putting a rule alongside a component to determine a length, or measuring time using a stopwatch. More often a more complex system is used, which can be understood by thinking of the elements that make it up. Such a system is shown in Figure 6.32. Many variations are possible.

The measurand acts on a transducer and produces a signal corresponding to its value. This output signal is commonly electrical, but may be pneumatic or optical. The signal can then be transmitted as needed. We show the transmission or telemetry as a distinct part of the system in Figure 6.32 to indicate its importance. Some processing of the signal is often needed before it is displayed or recorded. Often a computer is used to control the whole operation, probably covering many transducers, partly in the light of the information given by the measurements.

For instance, temperatures might need to be determined at many points on a plant. Thermocouples could be used as transducers, other equipment being some

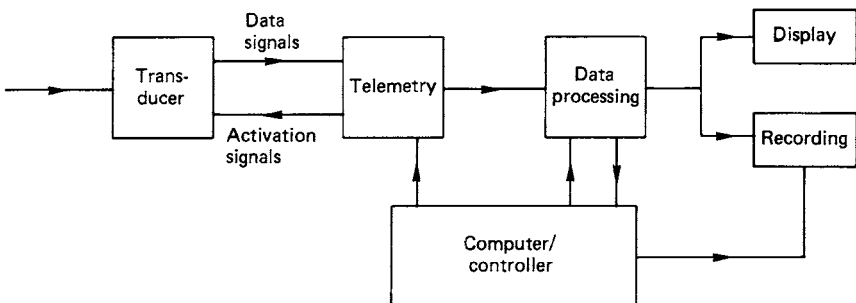


FIGURE 6.32 Typical instrumentation system.

distance away, more accessible, and in a less severe environment. Temperatures should be recorded at regular intervals, maxima, minima, and averages being extracted and an alarm given if any temperature exceeds a prechosen limit. Such a system might be part of the control of operational plant, signals being available as inputs for actuators. Alternatively, it might be logging the results of an experiment.

Most data processing and computing use digital signals, as does complex telemetry; simple, short-range telemetry can be analog. Most transducers have analog outputs, so an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) is needed at the input to data processors. If the transducer gives an output in the form of frequency, the ADC can operate simply by counting the number of cycles in a given time.

Communicating to operators the results of measurement is a distinct phase of the whole. It may amount to recording permanently for study later, possibly simply on paper, more probably in some form suitable for computer input. Alternatively, an indication (called Display) may be needed to show immediately the output of the instrumentation system. This is all part of the human/machine interface.

Accuracy

The accuracy of any instrumentation system is, of course, of great importance. When making a measurement it is possible to distinguish systematic and random errors. When a measurement of what should be the same thing is repeated it will be found that the readings are not identical; the spread of readings corresponds to random errors between individuals. The final error can be reduced by repetition and averaging (provided time allows). However, even the average is not necessarily correct, because it contains the systematic error. Systematic errors can be greatly reduced by careful calibration under conditions resembling the operating ones as closely as possible. Calibration is in fact an important feature of all systems where it is required to relate the readings taken back to absolute values of the quantities concerned. The word “traceability” is used to describe building up links in this chain. Absolute values of measurands, are not always important. Sometimes it is “repeatability”—the capability of giving the same reading (even if it is the wrong one!) under the same conditions—that matters. The precision of a reading relates to the smallest difference in value that can be detected.

When considering how faithfully an instrument represents what it is supposed to be measuring, the idea of “influence quantities” should be taken into account. The resistance of a strain gauge, for instance, varies with strain and so is used to measure it; but it also varies with temperature, so a one-to-one correspondence with strain will only hold provided temperature is constant. Temperature is an influence quantity. Reducing the errors introduced by influence quantities is facilitated by making bridge measurements. This idea is most familiar in electrical circuits, when two components are connected so that changes in them affect the output in opposite directions. It can then be arranged that influence quantities affect them equally and so cancel, while the measurand either only affects one component or affects them oppositely.

Another concept that is helpful in understanding transducer performance is that of gauge factor. This is the ratio of the fractional change in output to the fractional change in measurand. Again it is easily understood in the frequently quoted example of the resistance strain gauge, where it is given by the formula

$$\delta R/R = \delta l/l$$

However, the concept is more generally applicable, with the expectation that a transducer with a higher gauge factor will be more immune to influence factors.

Hysteresis is observed in many instruments. This is the name given to the defect of indicating a different output according to whether the quantity measured is increasing or decreasing (see Figure 6.33). Nonlinearity is also shown in Figure 6.33. This is the situation when the relation between input and output cannot be exactly represented by a straight line.

Reliability

The reliability of any equipment is often of the utmost importance, and instrumentation systems are no exception. Attempts have been made to develop the concept of reliability, putting it on a semiquantitative—though necessarily probabilistic—basis, so allowing the chances of failure to be calculated. While carrying out such an exercise, lessons can be learned of features that have been identified as significant. With large systems, the configuration in which different items are connected can make an unexpected difference. The schedule of servicing plays a large part in the down time that is to be expected. The consequences of any particular failure, which may be very diverse, should be analyzed. The idea of independence may be developed; this implies that it is safer for two measurements, if they are intended to corroborate one another, to be made with essentially different components—or even techniques—because they are then less likely to suffer from a common fault. In all considerations of instruments and their installations due weight must be placed on reliability. High accuracy has little value if it cannot be counted on, or perhaps it may be put that the possibility of a very large error can be more damaging than the probability of a small one.

Environmental Conditions

In a broad way, it is always recognized that there are limits to the conditions under which instruments can be used. The working temperature range may well be specified. Users should be aware of other significant conditions. The atmosphere can be harmful, from moisture or other corrosive effects; dust in the atmosphere is an

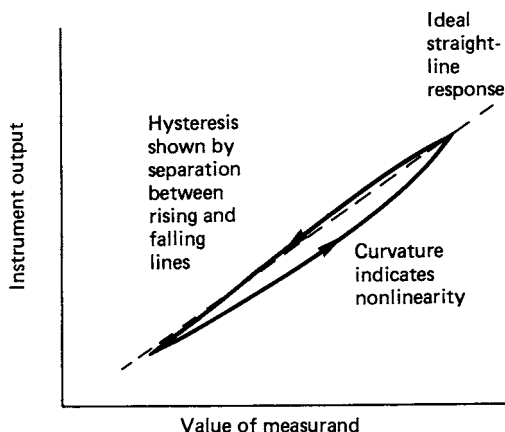


FIGURE 6.33 Hysteresis and nonlinearity errors.

enemy to many instruments. Subjection to mechanical abuse (notably excessive vibration) must also be guarded against. More sophisticated hazards include electrical interference and nuclear radiation. The capabilities of particular items to withstand all these are often not spelled out. Common sense is often called for to judge what is reasonable to expect. Sometimes precise limits are quoted by suppliers, but it should be noted that approaching these limits closely may reduce accuracy and especially reliability.

Frequency Coverage

A simple description of what an instrument does may imply that there is an indefinite amount of time in which to make a measurement—the steady-state or d.c. behavior. Sometimes this is not the whole relevant story. There are certain devices that cannot be used for steady-state measurements, but only for varying ones. There is always an upper limit to the frequency at which an instrument will operate faithfully. This may restrict the number of readings that can be taken in a limited time and is very often of concern when the measurement process is part of a closed control loop (see Part 7). It is therefore of great importance to take account of this feature of an instrument's performance.

6.19 DIMENSIONAL/GEOMETRICAL MEASUREMENTS

The lengths that people have been interested in and hence wanted to measure range from perhaps 10^{-15} to 10^{18} meters. At the extremes the interest is mainly from nuclear physicists and astronomers, and we shall here concentrate more on the middle distances.

Of course, there are simple, manual instruments that will continue to be used: rules, micrometers, calipers. A dial gauge incorporates gears to provide magnification so that a movement of even a fraction of a millimeter gives an observable rotation of a pointer. Gauge blocks should be mentioned—elements with accurately parallel faces a precise distance apart; they can be thought of as coming into a calibration exercise, or as forming references allowing the dimensions of other parts to be compared with them.

However, a large part of modern dimensional instrumentation involves converting lengths into electrical (or, occasionally, optical or pneumatic) signals. The three electrical quantities—resistance, inductance, and capacitance—are all used in transducers for this purpose.

Resistance Transducers

In one form of transducer a slider moves over an extended resistance element, which may be either wire-wound or made of some nonmetal. The resistance between the contact of the slider and either end of the element varies with the position of the former. Such devices are simple and only need simple electrical equipment. They can be made to obey some nonlinear law if that should be wanted. However, they are not of the highest accuracy, and, because rubbing and friction occur, cannot be expected to have indefinitely long lives.

A different form of resistance transducer is the strain gauge. In essence, a small element is bonded to a structural unit and changes its resistance with the dimensional changes brought about by the latter being strained. The length changes are small (typically a fraction of a percent) and the resistance changes are generally only a little larger. However, because it is possible to measure electrical resistance very precisely, strain gauges can still be used in accurate work. When directly measuring strain, they are, of course, measuring very small movements and need a large force to act on them. The range can be increased and the force reduced by having the movement to be measured applied to a flexible strip on which the gauge is mounted, as shown in Figure 6.34.

Inductance Transducers

The inductance of a coil is given approximately by

$$L = N^2 \frac{A}{l} \mu$$

where N is the number of turns, A the cross-sectional area, μ the effective permeability, and l the length of the magnetic path. For an iron-cored coil with an air gap as shown in Figure 3.35 two very different values of μ arise, and the formula becomes

$$L = \frac{N^2 A}{(l_{\text{iron}}/\mu_{\text{iron}}) + (l_{\text{air}}/\mu_{\text{air}})}$$

Even for small values of the air gap, $(l_{\text{iron}}/\mu_{\text{iron}} \ll (l_{\text{air}}/\mu_{\text{air}}))$ and L is very sensitive to changes in l_{air} . Many inductance transducers make use of this principle.



FIGURE 6.34 Strain gauge on flexible strip.

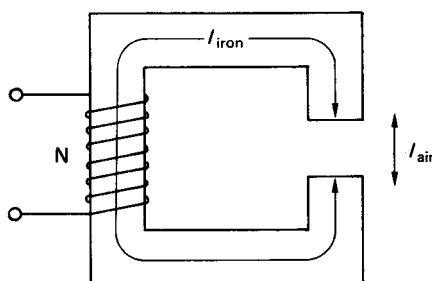


FIGURE 6.35 Coil with air gap.

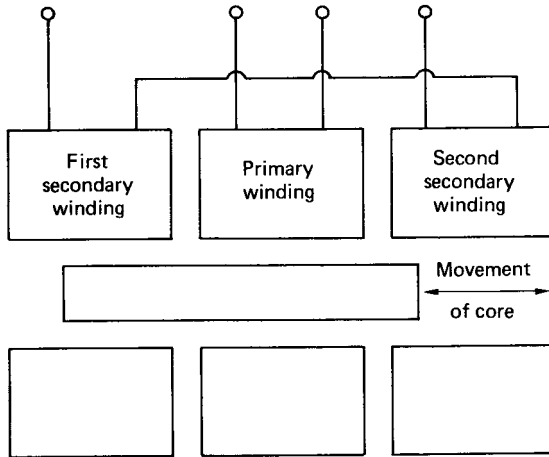


FIGURE 6.36 Linear variable differential transformer (LVDT).

If extreme sensitivity is not required, the iron circuit need not be so nearly closed. An example of an instrument of this type is the linear variable differential transformer (LVDT), where there are two further refinements shown in Figure 3.36:

1. A differential system is used so that the inductance of one winding increases at the same time as that of another decreases; and
2. By having a further winding, a mutual inductance or transformer replaces the self-inductance.

These additions increase the magnitude and linearity of the output and give an inbuilt bridge system, so increasing the effective gauge factor.

While most practical devices employ ferromagnetic (iron) cores, it is, in principle, possible to have an air-cored inductor serving as a transducer.

Capacitance Transducers

The electrical capacitance in farads between a pair of parallel plates (as shown in Figure 6.37) is

$$C = \epsilon_0 \epsilon \frac{A}{d}$$

where ϵ_0 = the permittivity of free space ($= 8.9 \times 10^{-12}$ F/m)

ϵ = the relative permittivity of the material between the plates

A = the area of either plate, or of their overlap if they are not exactly equal and opposite

d = the separation between the plates

C can therefore be changed by changing either A or d . Since d can be a millimeter