

Application Note

Low ESR Capacitor Measurements

The rise in the use of portable electronic devices and performance improvements in personal computers, have placed increasing demands upon the passive components used in these products. The additional supply current requirement that accompanies increased microprocessor speed and consumer demand for extended battery life in portable electronics, contribute to the need for capacitors with lower equivalent series resistance (ESR). This article will explain what ESR is, discuss the trend towards the development of capacitors with lower equivalent series resistance, and describe the test challenges these devices can present.



Technology Drivers & Trends

In microprocessor based systems switching currents place great demands upon the power distribution system. As the system frequency increases and as the system supply voltage decreases, the demands become even greater. Modern systems require power supplies with much higher current capabilities than in the past with load change transients typically from 30 to 80 A/ μ S.¹ Resistance and inductance in power cables and traces prevent the power supply from delivering the peak currents required. The purpose of the bypass capacitor is to store energy and to supply the high instantaneous currents during switching and to prevent the supply from drooping. Any losses within the capacitor limit its ability to supply this current. The losses also cause heat to be dissipated within the capacitor contributing to reduced system efficiency. In portable electronic devices, lower system efficiency reduces battery life or requires the use of physically larger batteries. To provide adequate supply decoupling and maintain low loss, the capacitor must have low impedance at high frequencies. This requires a capacitor with low ESR.

In the past 3.5 years, microprocessor current has increased by a factor of 5 and ESR requirements have dropped by a factor of 7. Next generation microprocessors will have lower voltages and increased supply currents. They will require higher value capacitors with lower ESR. To meet the changing requirements, capacitor manufacturers must cut ESR in half every 1.5 years.² Future microprocessors will require capacitors with equivalent series resistance of less than 10m Ω . Improvements in battery technology have allowed for smaller battery sizes without compromising capacity. To meet consumer demand for portable electronics with extended battery life, designers are making systems more efficient. This continuing trend will necessitate further reductions in ESR. To meet present system decoupling requirements, designers parallel capacitors to obtain the needed



Application Note

capacitance and ESR values. The disadvantages to using multiple capacitors are increased circuit area, increased material cost, and increased assembly cost.

WHAT IS ESR?

Equivalent Series Resistance is a frequency variable measure of the total lossiness of a capacitor. It is sometimes referred to as R_s . ESR is the real part of Z and the unit of measure is ohms (Ω). It can be calculated from the real part of admittance (G_p) and susceptance (B_p) according to the equation: $ESR = G_p / (G_p^2 + B_p^2)$. The measured ESR consists of several different phenomena:

1. **The actual series resistance (R_{as}):** The ohmic resistance of the leads or plates. This value is typically very low. It causes a power loss of $I^2 R_{as}$. Its contribution to the total dissipation factor is $D_1 = \omega R_{as} C$
2. **The leakage resistance (R_L):** A parallel resistance due to leakage current in the capacitor. This value is typically very high. It causes a power loss of V^2/R_L . Its contribution to the total dissipation factor is $D_2 = 1 / (\omega R_L C)$.
3. **The dielectric loss (R_D):** A parallel resistance arising from two phenomena; molecular polarization and interfacial polarization (dielectric absorption). Dielectric loss is a complex phenomenon that can change with frequency in most any manner that is not abrupt. Its' contribution to the total dissipation factor can be approximated by $D_3 \approx 1 / (\omega R_D C_B)$. One model is a frequency variable resistor (R_D) in series with a large blocking capacitor (C_B).

A model depicting the three contributing elements to ESR is shown in Figure 1.

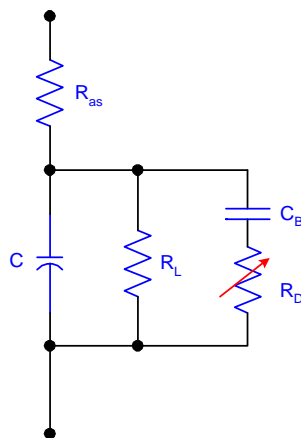


Figure 1.0: Circuit Components of ESR

Application Note

How the three loss phenomena contribute to the total loss (dissipation factor) of the capacitor is illustrated in Figure 2. Dissipation varies with frequency.

Dissipation Factor

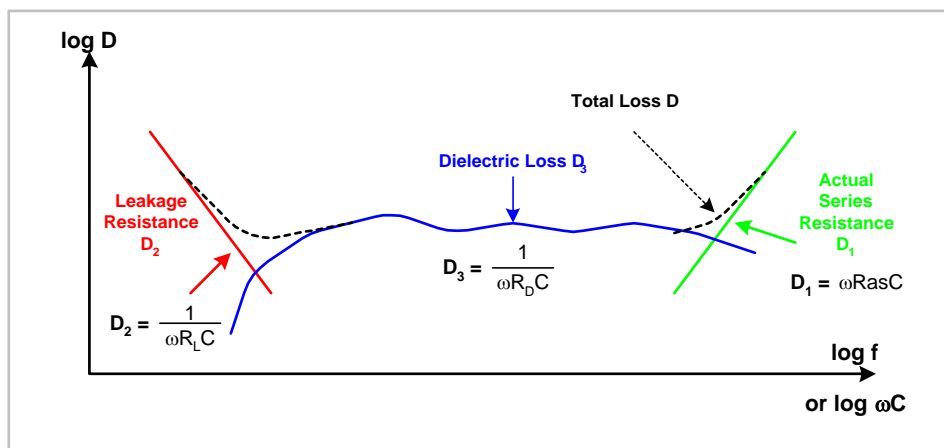


Figure 2.0: Factors of Total Loss

The capacitor manufacturers have been successful at meeting the market requirements for low ESR capacitors. However, as the ESR values go down, making reliable measurements becomes more difficult. As with any type of measurement, accuracy and repeatability suffers as the measured parameter becomes very small or very large.

It is possible to make good measurements if proper techniques are followed. Low ESR measurements require the same attention to error sources as any other very low impedance measurement. A good four terminal (Kelvin) connection to the device to be measured is required. Cables and fixtures must be of high quality to insure repeatable measurements.

Contact resistance is a major error source in low impedance measurements. Maximizing contact area, maintaining clean contacts, and insuring consistent device placement, are ways to achieve reliable measurements. Short circuit compensation will correct for a stable, unchanging contact resistance. A changing contact resistance introduces errors. When measuring low ESR, even a $1\text{m}\Omega$ variation can be significant.

In order to make accurate ESR measurements, it is important to reduce external electrical repeatability of the measurement. The instrument rejects common mode coupling into signal pairs therefore, common routing of pairs of signals (current or voltage) will reduce differential signals and reduce measurement variability. The physical set up of the system is also important to insure repeatable measurements. Magnetic coupling of the stimulus current into a measurement channel



Application Note

will sum with the desired signal to alter the measurement. Maintaining a constant geometry of cabling will allow the instrument's short circuit correction to cancel this effect. If the geometry of the cabling and contact system changes after the short circuit correction is applied, the measurement can have additional errors. In simpler terms, secure all cabling and insure that nothing moves while performing measurements.

Measurements & Results

At lower ESR values, it is important to use available instrument features such as open and short circuit compensation, the reduction of measurement speed, the use of averaging, and if a known standard is available, the use of load correction. All of these methods can help to maximize measurement accuracy. Short circuit compensation is particularly important in measuring low ESR devices.

Finally, it is necessary to know the limitations of the system. For any precision measurement it is important to identify and quantify all error sources. To measure instrumentation limitations, recording the results of repeated measurement of a single device can help to quantify instrumentation measurement uncertainty. To measure fixture limitations, perform repeated measurements of a single device with the part removed and reinserted into the test fixture between measurements. This will quantify the variability of the contact resistance.

Summary

Advances in microprocessor technology and the need to extend battery life have been the technology drivers requiring the development of low ESR capacitors. Capacitor manufacturers have introduced new technology and refined processes to meet the new requirements.

There are instruments that are capable of measuring capacitors being manufactured now. However, in order to make valid measurement, great care must be taken. As the trend toward lower ESR continues new instruments will be required to meet the measurement challenges of tomorrow.

For complete product specifications on IET Labs's LCR meters or any of IET Labs's products, visit us at www.ietlabs.com. Do you have an application specific testing need? Call us at 516-334-5959 and we'll work with you on a custom solution. Put IET Labs to the test because we're committed to solving your testing requirements.

References:

¹"Powering and Decoupling Higher Speed Logic Will Require Low ESR/ESL Capacitors", Ian W. Clelland, PCIM July 2000.

²"Passive Components Market Research Seminar: 2000", IET Labs Application Note 035002, September 2000

³"LCR Measurement Primer", IET Labs, Inc.

