Application Note AN-111

Surge Arrester Technologies

SRC DEVICES

GAS DISCHARGE TUBE ■ AIR GAP ■ CARBON BLOCK ■ SCR ■ ZENER DIODE ■ MOV

In today's world of sensitive electronics, an increasingly important topic has become the protection of electronic components from overvoltage surges. There is a multitude of devices on the market for this purpose but what are the differences between them and which is best for what application? The following describes, analyzes, and compares these devices in detail.

Basically there are two types of surge protection classifications with each consisting of its own group of devices:

CROWBAR
- Air Gap
- Carbon Block
- Gas Discharge Tube (GDT)
- Silicon Controlled Rectifier (SCR)

CLAMP
- Zener (Avalanche) Diode
- Metal Oxide Varistor (MOV)

CROWBAR PROTECTION

A crowbar device limits the energy delivered to the protected circuit by abruptly changing from a high impedance state to a low impedance state in response to an elevated voltage level. Having been subjected to a sufficient voltage level the crowbar begins to conduct. While conducting, the voltage across the crowbar remains quite low (typically less than 15 volts for gas discharge tubes usually higher for the air gap and carbon block protectors) and thus, the majority of the transient's power is dissipated in the circuit's resistive elements and not in the protected circuit nor the crowbar itself. This allows the crowbar to be able to withstand and protect loads from higher voltage and/or higher current levels for a greater duration of time than clamping devices.

AIR GAP PROTECTOR

An air gap protector consists of two conductive surfaces with a spacing between them that will permit an arc when a specified potential is placed across the surfaces. The air gap is not a sealed device and therefore it must operate at atmospheric pressure and under the effects of the environment. Since the electrodes are exposed to the environment, they will often experience oxidation and corrosion which is not a problem common to an SRC gas discharge tube. These factors contribute to the air gap's high nominal breakdown voltage, wide breakdown voltage tolerance, and poor impulse response. Often an air gap is placed in parallel with a gas discharge tube or carbon block protector to provide back up protection in the event that the primary protection fails.

CARBON BLOCK PROTECTOR

A carbon block protector consists of a pair of carbon elements separated by a 0.003-0.004 inch air gap. When a specified potential is placed across the carbon surfaces an arc will be initiated. Like the air gap protector, the carbon block is an unsealed device and its performance suffers in the same manner as the air gap. Carbon block protectors are used mainly for telephone line protection but are being replaced, in most installations, with the more reliable and consistent gas discharge tubes.

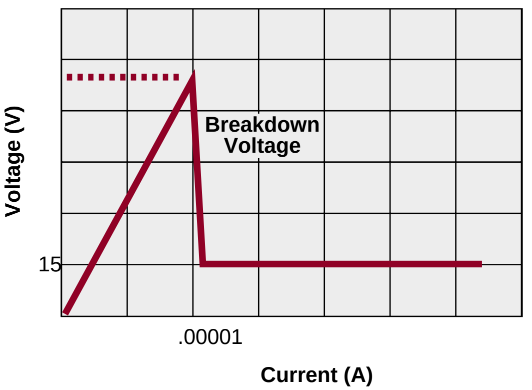
GAS DISCHARGE TUBE (GDT)

SRC's GDT, a hermetically sealed gas filled ceramic tube with metal electrodes, is recognized for:

- Stable electrical parameters
- High insulation resistance
- Low capacitance
- High current capability
- Low leakage current
- Low arc voltages

For a gas tube to begin conduction, an electron within the sealed device must gain sufficient energy to initiate the ionization of the gas. Complete ionization of the gas takes place through electron collision. The events leading up to this phenomenon occur when a gas tube is subjected to a rising voltage potential. Once the gas is ionized, breakdown occurs and the gas tube changes from a high impedance state to a virtual short circuit and thus, any transient will be diverted from and will not reach the protected circuit. The arc voltage (the voltage across the gas tube while the gas tube is conducting) will typically be 15 volts. After the transient has passed, the GDT will extinguish and again appear as an open circuit. In order to insure gas tube turn off at the zero crossing in AC applications, the current through the GDT once the transient has passed, must be less than the follow-on current rating of the gas tube. The follow-on current requirement can easily be met by placing a resistor in series with the gas tube. SRC's AC series of gas discharge tube surge arresters were developed specifically to protect AC power lines and normally will not require additional components to limit follow-on current. In DC applications, the gas discharge tube will extinguish as long as the device is operated within the specified holdover conditions. Holdover conditions involve the maximum bias voltage that can appear across a gas discharge tube under specified current conditions and still allow the gas discharge tube to turn off. Under normal operating conditions, the GDT shunted across a circuit, will act like an open switch with a high insulation resistance.

Gas Discharge Tube
Voltage vs. Current Characteristics



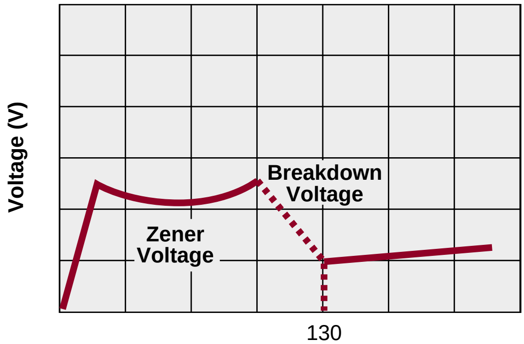
The GDT's breakdown voltage is determined by electrode spacing, gas type (usually neon and/or argon), gas pressure (less than atmospheric), and the rate of rise of the transient. Breakdown voltage is defined as that voltage at which a crowbar type of surge arrester changes from a high impedance state to a low impedance state. The series is categorized by the breakdown voltage of each gas tube when a slowly rising transient is applied. For example: SRC's GDT, CG2230L gas tube, will breakdown at 230V (+/- 15%) when subjected to a ramp with a rate of rise of 500V/second. The breakdown voltage response of a crowbar to transients with ramp rates of 1V/microsecond or less is referred to as the DC breakdown voltage level. Due to the nature of gas discharge tubes, the same gas tube will experience breakdown at a higher voltage as a transient's ramp rate increases. For example: At 100V/microsecond, the CG2230L gas tube will breakdown at 600V maximum. The breakdown voltage response of a crowbar to transients with ramp rates greater than 1V/microsecond is referred to as the impulse breakdown voltage level.

Due to the GDT's rugged construction, it can handle currents that far surpass other transient suppressors' capabilities - greater than 10 pulses of a 20,000 peak amperes pulse having a rise time of 8 microseconds decaying to half value in 20 microseconds (also referred to as an 8/20 wave form). The surge life of the GDT is at least 1000 shots of a 500 amperes peak 10/1000 pulse. Because it is being used in a repetitive switching application, the ETS series GDT has been designed for surge life greater than 100,000 shots. With a maximum inter-electrode capacitance of 1 picofarad, the GDT can easily be designed into RF circuits. The GDT is the practical device for the protection of telephone circuits, AC power lines, modems, power supplies, CATV and almost any application where protection from large and/or unpredictable transients is desired.

SILICON CONTROLLED RECTIFIER (SCR)

Unlike the crowbar devices discussed above, the SCR is a semiconductor. Like the GDT, the SCR will have a very low voltage drop across it while conducting. The SCR does require a trigger signal when a surge is present before it can begin to conduct. This trigger signal is usually supplied through the use of a zener diode. Packages that combine the SCR and zener diode are now available. These packages are monolithic devices and often contain an SCR-type thyristor with a gate region that acts like the avalanche diode. Once triggered, the SCR begins to conduct, dropping the voltage across the zener diode to a value below the zener's operating voltage and thus causing the zener to stop conducting. The SCR will conduct until the applied voltage drops to zero (zero crossing of AC) or until the current falls below a specified value (sometimes referred to as a holding current).

SCR
Voltage vs. Current Characteristics



Although typically having a faster response time than a GDT, the SCR package is subject to higher leakage current and capacitance. The SCR package can handle currents of several hundred amperes of an 8/20 wave form and packages are available that offer bi-directional protection.

CLAMPING PROTECTION

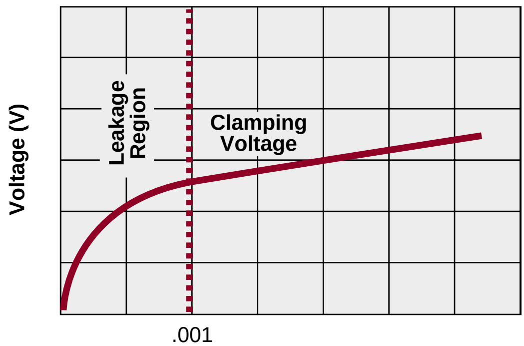
A clamping device actually limits the voltage transient to a specified level by varying its internal resistance in response to the applied voltage. A clamping device must absorb the transient's energy and therefore, cannot withstand very high current levels. Although these devices have quick response times, they are subject to leakage currents and their capacitance values are higher than those found in the GDT.

ZENER (AVALANCHE) DIODE

The zener diode comes closest to modeling the ideal constant voltage clamp. It responds quickly to a fast rising voltage potential and is available for a fairly wide range of clamping voltages (from less than 10 volts up to several hundred volts). The zener is placed in parallel with the circuit to be protected and will not operate until a surge exceeds the zener's breakdown voltage. The surge, causing the zener to conduct will be clamped to the zener's rated voltage. The zener is a good protector for circuits operating at low voltages. Caution is advised when designing the device into RF circuits due to the diode's high capacitance.

Also available are silcon avalanche suppressers which are referred to as transient voltage suppressers (TVS) diodes. These diodes consist of fairly large junction zeners which have been designed specifically for surge protection. The TVS diodes are rated for higher current surges than zener diodes and they can carry these currents for periods of 2-10 microseconds.
For use in AC signal lines, two zeners are required. These are available as packaged devices. Avalanche diodes are often used to protect IC's from static discharge and other forms of transients in power supplies computer buses, and data lines.

Avalanche Diode
Voltage vs. Current Characteristics



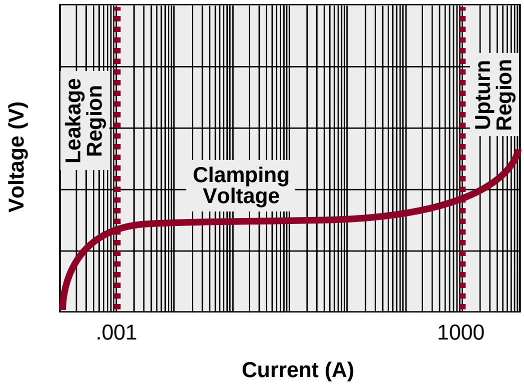
MOV (METAL OXIDE VARISTOR)

As its name suggests, the MOV is a voltage variable resistor made from sintered metal oxides. The grains produced in the sintered metal oxide material of the MOV can be thought of as a network of series and parallel diodes. As the voltage potential across the MOV increases, some of the diodes experience avalanche breakdown and begin to conduct and as a result, reduce the net resistance of the MOV.

The MOV can handle current pulses of higher peak values and for a longer duration than a diode, but the MOV can experience cumulative degradation and performance changes after it is exposed to large current pulses when not properly selected. The high peak current surges tend to fuse the oxide grains and thus alter the MOV's performance. Some engineers recommend that a fuse be used with an MOV as a large current surge could damage the grain structure, fuse the grains together and result in the protected circuit being shorted out.

The MOV is available in a wide range of voltages and experiences a quick turn on time when subjected to a fast rising surge. The MOV is subject to leakage current and high capacitance (10's to 1000's of picofarads). When designing with a MOV it is necessary to remember that as the current through the device increases, the voltage which the MOV clamps at is greatly increased.

MOV
Voltage vs. Current Characteristics



GDT and MOV PROTECTION

In summary, there is no one ideal surge arrester device type that meets all of the key performance parameters for every application. Due to their complementary performance characteristics, however, a GDT and MOV can be combined in a circuit to provide the ultimate in surge suppression performance. The MOV quickly clamps a fast rising voltage surge while the GDT crowbars to safely dissipate the large peak current to ground.

SUMMARIZED COMPARISON OF TECHNOLOGIES

	GAS TUBE CG2230L	SCR	MOV	DIODE
Type of Device	CROWBAR	CROWBAR	CLAMP	CLAMP
Response Speed	<1 uSEC.	<100nSEC.	<100nSEC.	<100nSEC.
Capacitance	1pF MAX.	50pF	45pF	50pF
Leakage Current	<1 pAMP	50 nAMPS	10,000 nAMPS	10,000 nAMPS
Maximum Surge Current (8/20 µsec wave form)	20,000 AMPS	500 AMPS	200AMPS	50 AMPS
Relative Cost	$1.00	$1.50	$0.50	$1.50

The SRC Devices application engineering department provides objective technical expertise and application assistance to designer's of surge protection systems. Our mission is to assist you in designing the best solution to your specific application problem, regardless of manufacturer. To access our team of engineering professionals call toll free 1-866 SRC-8668.

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