

SOLAR CELLS

Operating Principles,
Technology,
and
System Applications

MARTIN A. GREEN

PRENTICE-HALL SERIES IN SOLID STATE PHYSICAL ELECTRONICS

Nick Holonyak, Jr., *Editor*

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Technology,
and System Applications**

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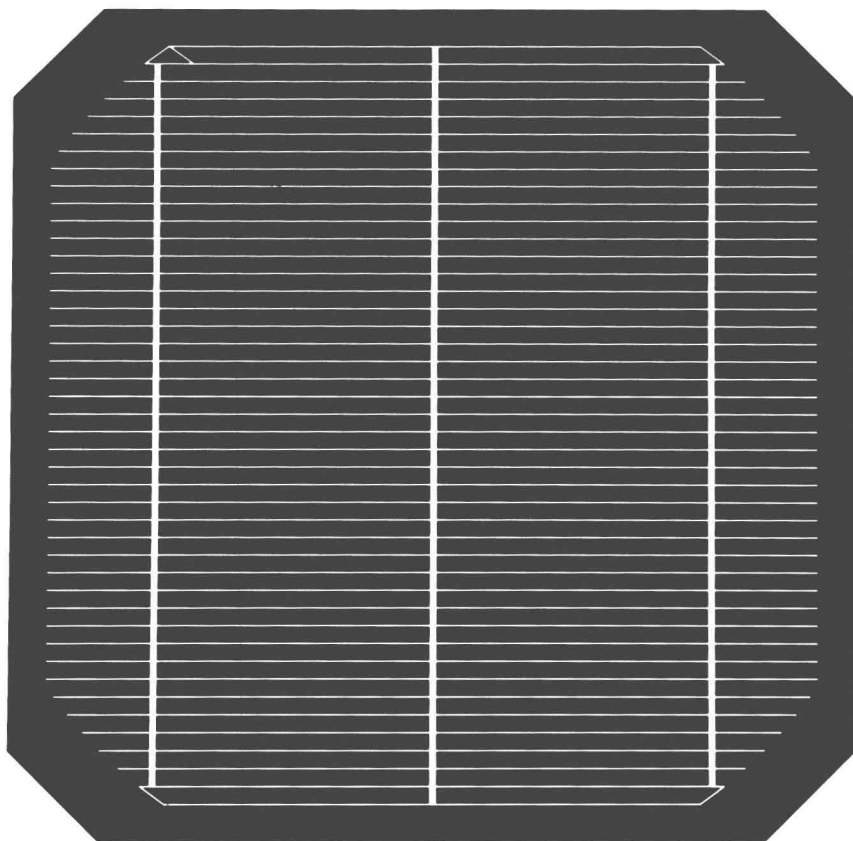
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This solar cell is made from a thin wafer of the semiconductor silicon, about 10 cm square and only a fraction of a millimeter thick. When the cell is illuminated, it converts the energy of the photons in the incident light into electrical energy. Under bright sunshine, the cell can supply a current of up to 3 A at a voltage of about $\frac{1}{2}$ V to an electrical load connected between the metallic contact grid apparent here and a second contact at the rear of the cell. (Photograph courtesy of Motorola, Inc.)

PREFACE

When sunlight strikes a solar cell, the incident energy is converted directly into electricity without any mechanical movement or polluting by-products. Far from being a laboratory curiosity, solar cells have been used for over two decades, initially for providing electrical power for spacecraft and more recently for terrestrial systems. There are very real prospects that the manufacturing technology for these cells can be improved dramatically in the near future. This would allow solar cells to be produced at prices where they could make significant contributions to world energy demands.

This book concentrates on providing descriptions of the basic operating principles and design of solar cells, of the technology used currently to produce cells and the improved technology soon to be in operation, and of considerations of importance in the design of systems utilizing these cells. Accordingly, the early chapters of the book review the properties of sunlight, the relevant properties of the semiconductor material from which the cells are constructed, and the interaction between these two elements. The next group of chapters treat in some detail the factors important in the design of solar cells,

current technology for fabricating them, and probable technological developments in the future. The final chapters deal with system applications, ranging from the small systems commercially available at present to residential and central power systems that may be available in the future.

The book is intended primarily for the increasing numbers of engineers and scientists attracted to this rapidly expanding field. As such, it is suitable for use as a textbook for both undergraduate and graduate courses. A deliberate attempt has been made not to exclude the material contained within from those readers who are entering the field through a different route. For example, a rather pictorial review of the properties of semiconductors relevant to the understanding of solar cell operation is included. Although this may serve as a quick review for many readers, for other readers it may provide a framework on which the material in subsequent chapters can be supported. Irrespective of background, working through the text and associated exercises would place the reader in a very strong position for future activity in this area.

I would like to acknowledge the large number of people, too numerous to mention individually, who have stimulated my interest in solar cells over the last decade. I would particularly like to thank Andy Blakers, Bruce Godfrey, Phill Hart, and Mike Willison for their suggestions and indirect encouragement in this venture. Special thanks are due to Gelly Galang for her help in preparing the manuscript and to John Todd and Mike Willison for preparing photographs incorporated into the text. Finally, I would like to thank Judy Green for her support and encouragement during the fairly intense period in which this book was developed.

Martin A. Green

CONTENTS

PREFACE	xiii
Chapter 1. SOLAR CELLS AND SUNLIGHT	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Outline of Solar Cell Development	2
1.3 Physical Source of Sunlight	2
1.4 The Solar Constant	4
1.5 Solar Intensity at the Earth's Surface	5
1.6 Direct and Diffuse Radiation	6
1.7 Apparent Motion of the Sun	8
1.8 Solar Insolation Data	8
1.9 Summary	9
Chapter 2. REVIEW OF SEMICONDUCTOR PROPERTIES	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Crystal Structure and Orientations	14
2.3 Forbidden Energy Gaps	17

2.4	Probability of Occupation of Allowed States	18	
2.5	Electrons and Holes	20	
2.6	Dynamics of Electrons and Holes	21	
2.7	Energy Density of Allowed States	23	
2.8	Densities of Electrons and Holes	24	
2.9	Bond Model of a Group IV Semiconductor	26	
2.10	Group III and V Dopants	28	
2.11	Carrier Densities	30	
2.12	Location of Fermi Level in Doped Semiconductors	32	
2.13	Effect of Other Types of Impurities	33	
2.14	Carrier Transport	34	
	2.14.1 Drift,	34	
	2.14.2 Diffusion,	36	
2.15	Summary	37	
Chapter 3.	GENERATION, RECOMBINATION, AND THE BASIC EQUATIONS OF DEVICE PHYSICS		40
3.1	Introduction	40	
3.2	Interaction of Light with Semiconductor	40	
3.3	Absorption of Light	43	
	3.3.1 Direct-Band-Gap Semiconductor,	43	
	3.3.2 Indirect-Band-Gap Semiconductor,	45	
	3.3.3 Other Absorption Processes,	47	
3.4	Recombination Processes	50	
	3.4.1 Relaxation to Equilibrium,	50	
	3.4.2 Radiative Recombination,	50	
	3.4.3 Auger Recombination,	52	
	3.4.4 Recombination through Traps,	53	
	3.4.5 Recombination at Surfaces,	55	
3.5	Basic Equations of Semiconductor-Device Physics	56	
	3.5.1 Introduction,	56	
	3.5.2 Poisson's Equation,	56	
	3.5.3 Current Density Equations,	57	
	3.5.4 Continuity Equations,	57	
	3.5.5 Equation Set,	58	
3.6	Summary	59	

Chapter 4.	<i>p-n</i> JUNCTION DIODES	62
4.1	Introduction	62
4.2	Electrostatics of <i>p-n</i> Junctions	63
4.3	Junction Capacitance	67
4.4	Carrier Injection	68
4.5	Diffusive Flow in Quasi-Neutral Regions	70
4.6	Dark Characteristics	72
	4.6.1 <i>Minority Carriers in Quasi-Neutral Regions</i>	72
	4.6.2 <i>Minority-Carrier Currents</i>	74
4.7	Illuminated Characteristics	76
4.8	Solar Cell Output Parameters	79
4.9	Effect of Finite Cell Dimensions on I_0	81
4.10	Summary	82
Chapter 5.	EFFICIENCY LIMITS, LOSSES, AND MEASUREMENT	85
5.1	Introduction	85
5.2	Efficiency Limits	85
	5.2.1 <i>General</i>	85
	5.2.2 <i>Short-Circuit Current</i>	86
	5.2.3 <i>Open-Circuit Voltage and Efficiency</i>	86
	5.2.4 <i>Efficiency Limits for Black-Body Cells</i>	90
5.3	Effect of Temperature	91
5.4	Efficiency Losses	92
	5.4.1 <i>General</i>	92
	5.4.2 <i>Short-Circuit Current Losses</i>	92
	5.4.3 <i>Open-Circuit Voltage Losses</i>	93
	5.4.4 <i>Fill Factor Losses</i>	96
5.5	Efficiency Measurement	98
5.6	Summary	101
Chapter 6.	STANDARD SILICON SOLAR CELL TECHNOLOGY	103
6.1	Introduction	103
6.2	Sand to Metallurgical-Grade Silicon	105

6.3	Metallurgical-Grade Silicon to Semiconductor-Grade Silicon	106
6.4	Semiconductor-Grade Polysilicon to Single-Crystal Wafers	107
6.5	Single-Crystal Wafers to Solar Cells	108
6.6	Solar Cells to Solar Cell Modules	111
	6.6.1 <i>Module Construction</i>	111
	6.6.2 <i>Cell Operating Temperature</i>	113
	6.6.3 <i>Module Durability</i>	114
	6.6.4 <i>Module Circuit Design</i>	115
6.7	Energy Accounting	117
6.8	Summary	119
Chapter 7.	IMPROVED SILICON CELL TECHNOLOGY	121
7.1	Introduction	121
7.2	Solar-Grade Silicon	121
7.3	Silicon Sheet	123
	7.3.1 <i>Sheet Requirements</i>	123
	7.3.2 <i>Ingot Technologies</i>	123
	7.3.3 <i>Ribbon Silicon</i>	124
7.4	Cell Fabrication and Interconnection	127
7.5	Analysis of Candidate Factories	131
7.6	Summary	135
Chapter 8.	DESIGN OF SILICON SOLAR CELLS	138
8.1	Introduction	138
8.2	Major Considerations	138
	8.2.1 <i>Collection Probability of Generated Carriers</i>	138
	8.2.2 <i>Junction Depth</i>	143
	8.2.3 <i>Lateral Resistance of Top Layer</i>	145
8.3	Doping of the Substrate	147
8.4	Back Surface Fields	149
8.5	Top-Layer Limitations	150
	8.5.1 <i>Dead Layers</i>	150
	8.5.2 <i>High-Doping Effects</i>	151
	8.5.3 <i>Contribution to Saturation Current Density</i>	153
8.6	Top-Contact Design	153

8.7	Optical Design	161
	8.7.1 Antireflection Coating,	161
	8.7.2 Textured Surfaces,	164
8.8	Spectral Response	165
8.9	Summary	167

Chapter 9. OTHER DEVICE STRUCTURES 170

9.1	Introduction	170
9.2	Homojunctions	170
9.3	Semiconductor Heterojunctions	172
9.4	Metal-Semiconductor Heterojunctions	175
9.5	Practical Low-Resistance Contacts	177
9.6	MIS Solar Cells	178
9.7	Photoelectrochemical Cells	181
	9.7.1 Semiconductor-Liquid Heterojunctions,	181
	9.7.2 Electrochemical Photovoltaic Cells,	181
	9.7.3 Photoelectrolysis Cell,	183
9.8	Summary	183

Chapter 10. OTHER SEMICONDUCTOR MATERIALS 187

10.1	Introduction	187
10.2	Polycrystalline Silicon	187
10.3	Amorphous Silicon	190
10.4	Gallium Arsenide Solar Cells	192
	10.4.1 Properties of GaAs,	192
	10.4.2 GaAs Homojunctions,	193
	10.4.3 $Ga_{1-x}Al_xAs/GaAs$ Heteroface Cells,	194
	10.4.4 AlAs/GaAs Heterojunctions,	196
10.5	Cu_2S/CdS Solar Cells	196
	10.5.1 Cell Structure,	196
	10.5.2 Operating Characteristics,	197
	10.5.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Cu_2S/CdS Cells,	199
10.6	Summary	200

Chapter 11.	CONCENTRATING SYSTEMS	204
11.1	Introduction	204
11.2	Ideal Concentrators	205
11.3	Stationary and Periodically Adjusted Concentrators	206
11.4	Tracking Concentrators	208
11.5	Concentrator Cell Design	209
11.6	Ultra-High-Efficiency Systems	213
	11.6.1 General,	213
	11.6.2 Multigap-Cell Concepts,	213
	11.6.3 Thermophotovoltaic Conversion,	217
11.7	Summary	219
 Chapter 12.	 PHOTOVOLTAIC SYSTEMS: COMPONENTS AND APPLICATIONS	 222
12.1	Introduction	222
12.2	Energy Storage	223
	12.2.1 Electrochemical Batteries,	223
	12.2.2 Large-Capacity Approaches,	225
12.3	Power Conditioning Equipment	226
12.4	Photovoltaic Applications	227
12.5	Summary	228
 Chapter 13.	 DESIGN OF STAND-ALONE SYSTEMS	 230
13.1	Introduction	230
13.2	Solar Module Performance	230
13.3	Battery Performance	232
	13.3.1 Performance Requirements,	232
	13.3.2 Lead-Acid Batteries,	232
	13.3.3 Nickel-Cadmium Batteries,	235
13.4	Power Control	235
13.5	System Sizing	237
13.6	Water Pumping	246
13.7	Summary	247

Chapter 14. RESIDENTIAL AND CENTRALIZED PHOTOVOLTAIC POWER SYSTEMS	249
14.1 Introduction	249
14.2 Residential Systems	250
14.2.1 <i>Storage Options</i>	250
14.2.2 <i>Module Mounting</i>	252
14.2.3 <i>Thermal Generation</i>	252
14.2.4 <i>System Configurations</i>	254
14.2.5 <i>Demonstration Program</i>	254
14.3 Central Power Plants	256
14.3.1 <i>General Considerations</i>	256
14.3.2 <i>Operating Mode</i>	258
14.3.3 <i>Satellite Solar Power Stations</i>	262
14.4 Summary	263
Appendix A PHYSICAL CONSTANTS	265
Appendix B SELECTED PROPERTIES OF SILICON	266
Appendix C LIST OF SYMBOLS	267
BIBLIOGRAPHY	269
INDEX	270

Chapter

1

SOLAR CELLS AND SUNLIGHT

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Solar cells operate by converting sunlight directly into electricity using the electronic properties of a class of material known as semiconductors. In the following chapters, this elegant energy-conversion process will be examined starting from the basic physical principles of solar cell operation. From this basis, the mathematical equations quantifying the energy transformation are developed. This is followed by a description of the technology used to produce present commercial solar cells, based predominantly on a particular semiconductor, silicon. Improvements in this technology, as well as alternative technologies that hold the promise of significantly lower cost, are then described. Finally, the design of solar cell systems is discussed, ranging from small power supplies for remote-area use to possible future residential and central power-generating plants.

In this chapter, the history of solar cell development is outlined briefly, followed by a review of the properties of the sun and its radiation.

1.2 OUTLINE OF SOLAR CELL DEVELOPMENT

Solar cells depend upon the *photovoltaic effect* for their operation. This effect was reported initially in 1839 by Becquerel, who observed a light-dependent voltage between electrodes immersed in an electrolyte. It was observed in an all-solid-state system in 1876 for the case of selenium. This was followed by the development of photo-cells based on both this material and cuprous oxide. Although a silicon cell was reported in 1941, it was not until 1954 that the forerunner of present silicon cells was announced. This device represented a major development because it was the first photovoltaic structure that converted light to electricity with reasonable efficiency. These cells found application as power sources in spacecraft as early as 1958. By the early 1960s, the design of cells for space use had stabilized, and over the next decade, this was their major application. Reference 1.1 is a good source of more detailed material up to this stage.

The early 1970s saw an innovative period in silicon cell development, with marked increases in realizable energy-conversion efficiencies. At about the same time, there was a reawakening of interest in terrestrial use of these devices. By the end of the 1970s, the volume of cells produced for terrestrial use had completely outstripped that for space use. This increase in production volume was accompanied by a significant reduction in solar cell costs. The early 1980s saw newer device technologies being evaluated at the pilot production stage, poised to enable further reduction in costs over the coming decade. With such cost reductions, a continual expansion of the range of commercial applications is ensured for this approach to utilizing the sun's energy.

1.3 PHYSICAL SOURCE OF SUNLIGHT

Radiant energy from the sun is vital for life on our planet. It determines the surface temperature of the earth as well as supplying virtually all the energy for natural processes both on its surface and in the atmosphere.

The sun is essentially a sphere of gas heated by a nuclear fusion reaction at its center. Hot bodies emit electromagnetic radiation with a wavelength or spectral distribution determined by the body's temperature. For a perfectly absorbing or "black" body, the spectral distribution of the emitted radiation is given by *Planck's radiation law* (Ref. 1.2). As indicated in Fig. 1.1, this law indicates that as a body is heated, not only does the total energy of the electromagnetic