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Battery Applications and Technology

Course Number: EE-02-307

PDH: 3

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Module 1: Definitions

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Identify** key electrochemical components and their roles within a battery system.
- **Differentiate** between various charging methods and battery states used in professional engineering applications.
- **Evaluate** critical operational risks such as gassing, sulfation, and thermal runaway.

Executive Summary: Mastery of standard battery terminology—from fundamental cell components to complex charging states—is essential for the precise specification, maintenance, and safe operation of energy storage systems.

Core Electrochemical Components

Understanding the physical makeup of a battery is the first step in managing its life cycle.

- **Cell:** The basic electrochemical unit used to store electrical energy.
- **Battery:** Two or more cells electrically connected to form a unit; however, in common usage, the term often applies to a single cell.
- **Electrode:** An electrical conductor and associated active materials where an electrochemical reaction occurs, also referred to as the positive and negative plates.
- **Active Material:** The constituents of a cell that participate in the electrochemical charge/discharge reaction.
- **Electrolyte:** The medium providing ion transport between the positive and negative electrodes of a cell.
- **Separator:** An electrically insulating layer that physically separates electrodes of opposite polarity while remaining permeable to ions.
- **Terminal:** The external electric connections of a cell or battery, also called a "terminal post" or "post".



Operational Metrics and States

Engineers must monitor these parameters to ensure system reliability and code compliance.

- **Voltage:** The electromotive force or potential difference, expressed in volts (V).
- **Potential Difference:** The work that must be done against electrical forces to move a unit charge from one point to another.
- **Current:** The flow of electrons equal to one coulomb of charge per second, expressed in amperes (A).
- **Capacity:** The number of ampere-hours (Ah) a fully charged cell or battery can deliver under specified conditions.
- **Specific Gravity:** The ratio of the weight of a solution to an equal volume of water; it is used as a primary indicator of the state of charge.
- **Duty Cycle:** The operating parameters of a cell or battery, including charge/discharge rates, depth of discharge, and standby mode duration.

Charging and Cycling Classifications

- **Primary Cell or Battery:** A unit not intended to be recharged and discarded after delivering its useful capacity.
- **Secondary Battery:** A battery that can be restored to its charged state by passing current in the opposite direction of discharge.
- **Cycle:** The discharge and subsequent charge of a secondary battery to restore it to its fully charged state.
- **Float Charge:** A charging method where a secondary cell is continuously connected to a constant-voltage supply to maintain a full charge.
- **Trickle Charge:** A method using a continuous or intermittent constant current supply to maintain a fully or nearly fully charged condition.
- **Equalizing Charge:** A charge greater than the normal float charge used to restore active materials and bring cell specific gravity to equal values.

Technical Constraints and Hazards

⚠️ **Safety Constraint:** Monitoring the cutoff voltage is critical, as discharging below this manufacturer-specified level can lead to battery damage.

- **Electrolysis:** The chemical dissociation of water into hydrogen and oxygen gas caused by electrical current.
- **Gassing:** The evolution of gas from electrodes resulting from electrolysis; significant gassing occurs when nearing a full charge or during an equalizing charge.
- **Sulfation:** The formation of lead sulfate crystals on the plates of a lead-acid battery.
- **Thermal Runaway:** A condition where charging energy results in internal heat generation greater than the heat dissipated, leading to uncontrolled temperature rise and potential melting.

📊 **Calculation Note:** Remember that **Capacity** is measured in **Ah**, while **Current** is measured in **A**. Use **Specific Gravity** to estimate the state of charge when electrical monitoring is insufficient.

💡 **Design Tip:** In standby or backup power systems, **Float Charging** is the preferred method to maintain readiness without the gassing risks associated with high-current charging.

Checkpoint Quiz

1. **A secondary battery is nearing a fully charged state, and you observe a significant evolution of hydrogen and oxygen gas. This phenomenon is defined as:**

- a) Sulfation
- b) Gassing
- c) Thermal Runaway
- d) Capacity Fade

Answer: (b). Significant gassing occurs when the battery is nearing its fully charged state or during an equalizing charge.

2. **Which of the following is used as an indicator of the state of charge in a cell or battery by measuring the ratio of the solution's weight to water?**

- a) Duty Cycle
- b) Specific Gravity
- c) Potential Difference
- d) Cutoff Voltage

Answer: (b). Specific gravity is specifically defined as the ratio of the weight of a solution to an equal volume of water and is used to indicate the state of charge.



3. What is the primary difference between a primary cell and a secondary battery?

- a) Primary cells have a higher cutoff voltage.
- b) Secondary batteries cannot be recharged once discarded.
- c) Secondary batteries can be restored to a charged state after discharge.
- d) Primary cells use a different electrolyte for ion transport.

Answer: (c). While primary cells are discarded after use, secondary batteries are designed to be recharged by passing current in the opposite direction of discharge.



Module 2: Overview of Batteries

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Identify** the mechanical and chemical differences between lead-antimony, lead-calcium, and lead-selenium grid alloys.
- **Calculate** battery discharge rates and capacity using C-rate formulas formatted for professional documentation.
- **Evaluate** the electrical implications of series, parallel, and series/parallel configurations for system design.

Executive Summary: Battery performance and longevity are determined by internal grid chemistry, precise capacity rating calculations, and the correct electrical configuration (series vs. parallel) to meet specific voltage and runtime requirements.

Battery Cell Construction: Antimony / Calcium / Selenium / Tin Alloying

The grid structure in pasted and tubular plate batteries requires alloying because pure lead cannot support its own weight or the active material vertically. Small quantities of antimony, calcium, tin, or selenium are added to provide strength and enhance electrical properties.

Comparison of Grid Alloys

- **Lead-Antimony:** Offers superior deep-cycling performance compared to lead-calcium but requires more frequent maintenance near end-of-life due to increased water consumption.
- **Lead-Calcium:** Features lower self-discharge rates and draws less current during float charges. However, long-term overcharging can lead to grid oxidation, causing plates to grow in size and potentially rupture the container.
- **Lead-Selenium:** A low lead-antimony alloy with added selenium, offering performance characteristics that fall between calcium and antimony types.



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