

## Frequently Asked Questions about Programmable Attenuators...

### What are the applications of Aeroflex / Weinschel programmable attenuators?

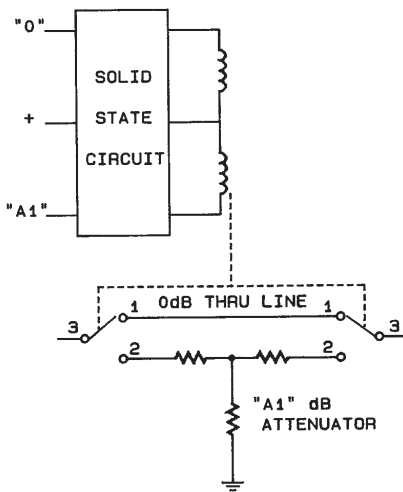
Aeroflex / Weinschel's programmable attenuators are used to control the power of radio frequency and microwave signals. Applications include control of input power to signal measuring systems, control of output power from signal generating systems, adjustment power for BIT error rate testing, controlling losses in a signal path and simulating the signal fading of a microwave communication system....to name just a few.

### How do they work?

Aeroflex / Weinschel's programmable attenuators consist of a series of attenuation pads (cells) that are selectively inserted into the signal path via a control signal. An example is a series of cells such as 1, 2, 4, 8 and 16 dB arranged in a binary sequence. Such an attenuator is called a binary attenuator. Combinations of cells are switched "on" to provide attenuation steps from 0 dB to 31 dB. Another example is a unit having cell values of 10, 20 and 40 dB which will provide 10 dB steps between 0 dB and 70 dB.

### How are the attenuators switched?

The basic structure of a programmable attenuator is shown below. There are several ways the attenuator pads are switched in and out of the RF path. Aeroflex / Weinschel's 3200 series uses TO-5 can relay switches. These are useful up to 2.0 GHz and higher. Aeroflex / Weinschel's 150 series operate up to 26.5 GHz and utilize reed switches housed within a precision machined cavity.



Aeroflex / Weinschel also manufactures programmable attenuators using solid state switching that offers faster switching speeds but their frequency range is more limited than mechanically step attenuators. Whereas mechanically switched attenuators operate from DC to their maximum frequency, solid state attenuators have a lower frequency limit. Solid state attenuators also have lower isolation between control and through path.

### How fast do the attenuators switch?

Switching speed of mechanically switched attenuators is typically between 6 and 35 msec. This is the maximum time between the application of the switching command to the cell and the cessation of contact bounce. This time is a function of switch structure and size.

### What is a latching and non-latching attenuator?

Non-latching is also called momentary or fail-safe. For the non-latching type, the attenuator is switched to the attenuation "on" position only so long as control power is applied to the switch. As soon as power is removed the switch reverts to its passive state or fail-safe state...usually the zero dB state. In latching attenuators each cell stays in the last setting even if power is removed. Latching attenuators have two control lines. One control line causes the attenuator to switch to the "attenuation on" setting while the other control line causes the attenuator to switch to the zero dB setting. There is normally a permanent magnet that holds the switch stable in either position.



Each version has its advantages and disadvantages. The non-latching switch requires constant power to the solenoid when in the "on" position. On the other hand the latching version requires greater switch current to overcome its permanent magnet.

### How are the attenuators controlled?

The Model 3200 and 3400 Series non-latching attenuators require only one 12 volt control line per cell. The direction of control current is not important.

The Model 150 Series is a latching version using one positive 5 volt or 24 volt common return line and two grounding control lines.

In order for switching to be guaranteed the voltage between common and control must be held within specified limits. Power supply regulation must be kept within range even while heavy switching current is being drawn. Any cable voltage drops must be added to the minimum control voltage to obtain the required power supply voltage at the attenuator.

Aeroflex / Weinschel's programmable attenuators, such as the Model 3200T, 3400T and 150T Series feature on-board TTL drivers. TTL driver boards are also available for most models.

# Programmable Attenuators



## What is the switch life of these programmable attenuators?

Specified life for mechanical switches is normally in the range of 1 to 10 million switching. This specification is per switch, independent of the other switches in the attenuator. For the Model 150 series attenuators the specification is 5 million cycles, i.e. one cycle is the switch moving in both directions. These specifications are based on the mechanical life of the switch, however, other factors have an impact on attenuator life. High power operation can have an adverse effect on the switch contact surfaces. This can reduce the overall life of the switch by causing the attenuator performance to go outside its specification.

## What is monotonicity?

A programmable step attenuator is considered monotonic if its attenuation always increases when it is commanded to increase. This applies on a per frequency basis. For instance the 20 dB setting at 1 GHz will always be less than the 21 dB setting at 1 GHz. This does not necessarily mean that the 20 dB setting at 1 GHz will always be less than the 21 dB setting 18 GHz. Monotonicity is influenced by the SWR of the individual attenuator cells as the cells are combined to form an attenuation value. It is also influenced by the summation of individual cell attenuation tolerances as the cells are combined.

## What is the difference between insertion loss and incremental attenuation?

Programmable attenuators have insertion loss and also incremental attenuation. Insertion loss is the loss through the attenuator when all cells are switched to zero dB. It is the residual loss of the device itself. Insertion loss usually increases with frequency reaching several dB at the higher frequencies and generally has very flat frequency response. Incremental attenuation is the attenuation values of the attenuators cells relative to the insertion loss. Since insertion loss is always present, the performance of a programmable attenuator is always given as incremental attenuation relative to insertion loss. Insertion loss is considered part of the fixed performance of the system path in which the programmable attenuator is located.

## What is the advantages of Attenuators with built-in driver circuitry?

These attenuators feature an internal microcontroller-based driver that provides a TTL-level digital interface for control of the attenuator relays (Figure 1). This card simplifies operation and interfacing requirements, while at the same time providing for greatly enhanced flexibility over past designs. User-selectable modes of operation include both parallel and serial bus.

The parallel mode provides a simple, one-bit per relay on/off control with internal pullups for use primarily in single attenuator applications. This mode allows the attenuator to be controlled via a variety of methods, such as a TTL-level digital output port, or mechanical toggle switches. The serial mode provides a two-wire serial bus structure and

protocol for connecting a number of devices to a single host control interface, suitable for use in larger system and sub-system applications. The built-in driver™ contains non-volatile configuration memory that is used to hold a wide variety of attenuator and driver-dependent parameters, including serial number, attenuator cell dB values, relay configurations, and switching requirements, which are all accessible via the digital interface. This frees the system designer from such low-level details, allowing faster integration. In either operational mode, the microcontroller enters an idle condition during periods of inactivity, turning off all on-board clocks, reducing EMI concerns, and lowering power consumption. On-board regulation for the digital circuitry allows the programmable attenuator to operate

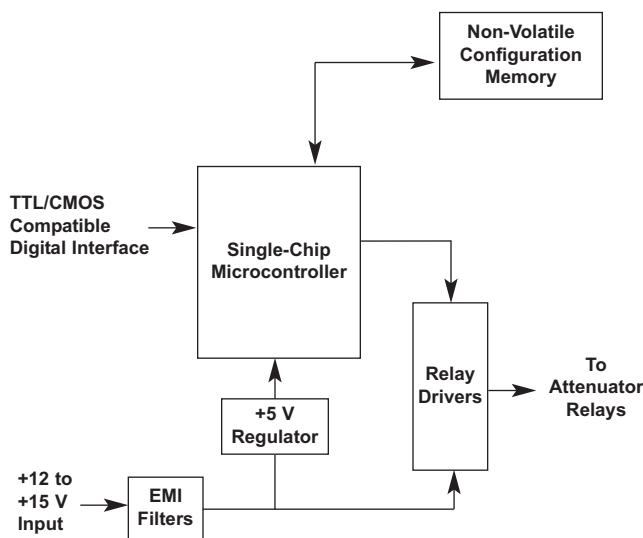


Figure 1. Digital Driver Circuitry

from a single input supply voltage.

## How can I control the Attenuators with built-in drivers?

The communications interface (Model 8210A) provides a flexible, low cost solution for the operation of programmable step attenuators and other electromechanical devices under computer control. Designed to interface to Aeroflex / Weinschel's line of programmable attenuators built-in intelligent drivers, the Model 8210A represents a new concept in device control applications for bench test and subsystem designs. The 8210A communications interface provides a high-level interface from various industry standard communications interfaces, including IEEE-488 and RS232 /RS422/RS485, to the programmable attenuators serial Driver Interface Bus.