Encyclopedia of Electronic Components Volume 1

Charles Platt
To Mark Frauenfelder, who reacquainted me with the pleasures of Making.
# Table of Contents

**Preface** .............................................................. xix

1. **How to Use This Book** ............................................. 1  
   - Reference vs. Tutorial ........................................... 1  
   - Theory and Practice ............................................. 1  
   - Organization ...................................................... 1  
   - Subject Paths ..................................................... 2  
   - Inclusions and Exclusions ....................................... 2  
   - Typographical Conventions ..................................... 3  
   - Volume Contents ................................................. 3  
   - Safari® Books Online ........................................... 3  
   - How to Contact Us ............................................... 4  

> **POWER**

> > **SOURCE**

2. **Battery** .............................................................. 5  
   - What It Does ...................................................... 5  
   - How It Works ..................................................... 6  
     - Electrode Terminology ....................................... 7  
   - Variants ........................................................... 7  
     - Disposable Batteries ......................................... 8  
     - Rechargeable Batteries ....................................... 9  
   - Values ............................................................ 11  
     - Amperage ....................................................... 11  
     - Capacity ....................................................... 11  
     - Voltage ......................................................... 13  
   - How To Use It .................................................... 14
What Can Go Wrong .................................................. 15
Short Circuits: Overheating And Fire .............................. 15
Diminished Performance Caused By Improper Recharging ... 15
Complete Discharge Of Lead-Acid Battery ....................... 15
Inadequate Current .................................................. 15
Incorrect Polarity ..................................................... 15
Reverse Charging ..................................................... 16
Sulfurization .......................................................... 16
High Current Flow Between Parallel Batteries ................. 16

3. Jumper ............................................................. 17
What It Does .......................................................... 17
How It Works ........................................................ 17
Variants ................................................................. 18
Values ................................................................. 18
How To Use It ....................................................... 19
What Can Go Wrong ............................................... 19

4. Fuse ................................................................. 21
What It Does .......................................................... 21
How It Works ........................................................ 21
Values ................................................................. 22
Variants ................................................................. 22
Small Cartridge Fuses ................................................. 23
Automotive Fuses .................................................... 23
Strip Fuses ............................................................ 24
Through-Hole Fuses .................................................. 24
Resettable Fuses ..................................................... 24
Surface Mount Fuses .................................................. 26
How To Use It ....................................................... 26
What Can Go Wrong ............................................... 27
Repeated Failure ...................................................... 27
Soldering Damage .................................................... 27
Placement ............................................................ 28

5. Pushbutton ......................................................... 29
What It Does .......................................................... 29
How It Works ........................................................ 29
Variants ................................................................. 30
Poles And Throws ...................................................... 30
On-Off Behavior ...................................................... 30
Slider ................................................................. 31
Styles ................................................................. 31
Termination And Contact Plating .................................... 32
Mounting Style ....................................................... 32
Sealed Or Unsealed .................................................. 32
6. Switch ................................................. 37
   What It Does ........................................ 37
   How It Works ....................................... 37
   Variants ............................................. 38
      Terminology ..................................... 38
      Poles And Throws ................................ 38
      On-Off Behavior ................................ 39
      Snap-Action ..................................... 39
      Rocker ........................................... 40
      Slider ........................................... 40
      Toggle .......................................... 41
      DIP ............................................... 43
      SIP ............................................... 44
      Paddle .......................................... 44
      Vandal Resistant Switch ......................... 45
      Tactile Switch ................................... 45
      Mounting Options ................................ 45
      Termination ...................................... 45
      Contact Plating Options ........................... 45
   Values .............................................. 45
   How To Use It ...................................... 46
      Power Switches ................................... 46
      Limit Switches ................................... 46
      Logic Circuits ................................... 47
      Alternatives ..................................... 47
   What Can Go Wrong ................................. 47
      Arcing ............................................ 47
      Dry Joints ........................................ 48
      Short Circuits .................................... 48
      Contact Contamination ............................ 48
      Wrong Terminal Type ............................... 48
      Contact Bounce ................................... 48
7. **Rotary Switch** ................................................. 51  
   What It Does .................................................. 51  
   How It Works .................................................. 52  
   Variants ....................................................... 52  
      Conventional .............................................. 52  
      Rotary DIP .................................................. 53  
      Gray Code .................................................. 54  
      PC Board Rotary Switch ................................. 55  
      Mechanical Encoder ..................................... 55  
      Pushwheel And Thumbwheel ............................. 55  
      Keylock ..................................................... 55  
   Values ......................................................... 56  
   How To Use It ................................................ 56  
   What Can Go Wrong ......................................... 57  
      Vulnerable Contacts ...................................... 57  
      Contact Overload ......................................... 57  
      Misalignment .............................................. 57  
      Misidentified Shorting Switch ......................... 57  
      User Abuse ............................................... 57  
      Wrong Shaft, Wrong Knobs, Nuts That Get Lost, Too Big To Fit 57  

8. **Rotational Encoder** ................................. 59  
   What It Does .................................................. 59  
   How It Works .................................................. 59  
   Variants ....................................................... 60  
      Pulses And Detents ...................................... 61  
      Format ..................................................... 61  
      Output ..................................................... 61  
      Rotational Resistance .................................. 61  
   Values ......................................................... 61  
      Contact Bounce ........................................... 61  
      Sliding Noise ............................................. 62  
   How To Use It ................................................ 62  
   What Can Go Wrong ......................................... 62  
      Switch Bounce ............................................ 62  
      Contact Burnout .......................................... 63  

9. **Relay** .................................................. 65  
   What It Does .................................................. 65  
   How It Works .................................................. 66  
   Variants ....................................................... 67  
      Latching ..................................................... 67  
      Polarity ..................................................... 67  
      Pinout Variations ......................................... 67
Reed Relay .................................................. 68
Small Signal Relay ........................................ 68
Automotive Relays ......................................... 69
General Purpose/Industrial .............................. 69
Time Delay Relay .......................................... 69
Contactor .................................................... 70
Values ......................................................... 70
How To Use It .............................................. 71
What Can Go Wrong ...................................... 72
Wrong Pinouts .............................................. 72
Wrong Orientation ........................................ 72
Wrong Type ................................................ 72
Wrong Polarity ............................................. 72
AC And DC .................................................. 72
Chatter ....................................................... 72
Relay Coil Voltage Spike ................................. 72
Arcing ......................................................... 72
Magnetic Fields ............................................ 72
Environmental Hazards ................................. 73

> MODERATION

10. Resistor .................................................. 75
    What It Does ............................................ 75
    How It Works .......................................... 76
    Variants ............................................... 76
        Resistor Array ................................... 77
    Values .................................................. 79
        Tolerance ........................................... 79
        Value Coding ..................................... 81
        Stability .......................................... 82
        Materials .......................................... 82
    How To Use It ........................................ 84
        In Series With LED ................................. 84
        Current Limiting With A Transistor .............. 84
        Pullup And Pulldown Resistors .................... 85
        Audio Tone Control ................................ 85
        RC Network ......................................... 85
        Voltage Divider ................................... 86
        Resistors In Series ................................ 86
        Resistors In Parallel .............................. 86
    What Can Go Wrong .................................. 87
        Heat .................................................. 87
        Noise ............................................... 87
        Inductance ........................................ 87
        Inaccuracy ......................................... 87

11. Potentiometer .................................................. 89
   What It Does .................................................. 89
   How It Works .................................................. 90
   Variants ......................................................... 90
      Linear And Log Taper ..................................... 90
      Classic-Style Potentiometer ............................ 91
      Multiple-Turn Potentiometer ......................... 92
      Ganged Potentiometer .................................. 93
      Switched Potentiometer ................................. 93
      Slider Potentiometer .................................... 93
      Trimmer Potentiometer .................................. 93
   How To Use It ................................................ 94
   What Can Go Wrong ......................................... 95
      Wear And Tear ............................................. 95
      knobs That Don’t Fit ..................................... 95
      Nuts That Get Lost ..................................... 95
      A Shaft That Isn’t Long Enough ...................... 96
      Sliders With No Finger Grip ............................ 96
      Too Big To Fit ............................................ 96
      Overheating ............................................... 96
      The Wrong Taper ......................................... 96

12. Capacitor .................................................... 97
   What It Does ................................................ 97
   How It Works ................................................ 97
   Variants ......................................................... 99
      Format ...................................................... 99
      Principal Types .......................................... 101
      dielectrics ............................................... 103
   Values ........................................................ 104
      Farads ..................................................... 104
      Commonly Used Values ................................ 104
      Dielectric Constant .................................. 105
      The Time Constant ..................................... 105
      Multiple Capacitors .................................... 106
      Alternating Current And Capacitive Reactance .... 106
      Equivalent Series Resistance ......................... 106
   How To Use It ................................................ 107
      Bypass Capacitor ........................................ 107
      Coupling Capacitor ..................................... 107
      High-Pass Filter .......................................... 107
      Low-Pass Filter ......................................... 107
      Smoothing Capacitor .................................... 108
      Snubber .................................................... 108
      Capacitor As A Battery Substitute ..................... 109
   What Can Go Wrong ......................................... 109
RF Problems ............................................. 133

> > CONVERSION

15. AC-AC Transformer ................................ 135
   What It Does ........................................ 135
   How It Works ....................................... 136
   The Core .......................................... 137
   Taps ................................................. 137
   Variants ............................................. 138
   Core Shapes ....................................... 138
   Power Transformer ................................ 138
   Plug-In Transformer ............................... 139
   Isolation Transformer ............................ 139
   Autotransformer ................................ 140
   Variable Transformer ............................ 140
   Audio Transformer ................................ 140
   Split-Bobbin Transformer ...................... 141
   Surface-Mount Transformer .................... 141
   Values ................................................ 141
   How To Use It ...................................... 142
   What Can Go Wrong ................................ 142
   Reversal Of Input And Output .................. 142
   Shock Hazard From Common Ground .......... 142
   Accidental DC Input ............................. 142
   Overload .......................................... 142
   Incorrect AC Frequency ......................... 142

16. AC-DC Power Supply .............................. 143
   What It Does ........................................ 143
   Variants ............................................. 143
   Linear Regulated Power Supply .............. 143
   Switching Power Supply ....................... 144
   Unregulated Power Supply .................... 146
   Adjustable Power Supply ...................... 146
   Voltage Multiplier ............................... 146
   Formats ............................................. 146
   How To Use It ...................................... 147
   What Can Go Wrong ............................... 147
   High Voltage Shock ............................... 147
   Capacitor Failure ................................ 147
   Electrical Noise ................................. 147
   Peak Inrush ........................................ 147

17. DC-DC Converter .................................. 149
   What It Does ........................................ 149
   How It Works ....................................... 149
   Variants ............................................. 150
Inaccurate Delivered Voltage .......................... 167

> ELECTROMAGNETISM

>> LINEAR

20. Electromagnet ........................................... 169
   What It Does ........................................... 169
   How It Works .......................................... 169
   Variants ............................................... 170
   Values .................................................. 171
   How To Use It ......................................... 171
   What Can Go Wrong ................................. 172

21. Solenoid .................................................. 173
   What It Does ........................................... 173
   How It Works .......................................... 174
   Variants ............................................... 176
      Low Profile ........................................ 176
      Latching ............................................ 176
      Rotary .............................................. 176
      Hinged Clapper ................................... 176
   Values .................................................. 176
      Coil Size Vs. Power .............................. 177
   How To Use It ......................................... 177
   What Can Go Wrong ................................. 177
      Heat .................................................. 177
      AC Inrush .......................................... 177
      Unwanted EMF ..................................... 177
      Loose Plunger ..................................... 177

>> ROTATIONAL

22. DC Motor .................................................. 179
   What It Does ........................................... 179
   How It Works .......................................... 179
   Variants ............................................... 181
      Coil Configurations ................................ 181
      Gearhead Motor .................................... 181
      Brushless DC Motor ............................... 183
      Linear Actuator .................................... 184
   Values .................................................. 184
   How To Use It ......................................... 185
      Speed Control ...................................... 186
      Direction Control .................................. 186
      Limit Switches ..................................... 187
   What Can Go Wrong ................................. 187
23. **AC Motor** ........................................ 191
   What It Does ........................................ 191
   How It Works ...................................... 191
   Stator Design ...................................... 191
   Rotor Design ...................................... 192
   Variants ............................................ 195
   Single-Phase Induction Motor .................... 195
   Three-Phase Induction Motor ..................... 196
   Synchronous Motor ................................ 196
   Reluctance Motor ................................ 197
   Variable Frequency Drive ....................... 198
   Wound-Rotor AC Induction Motor .............. 198
   Universal Motor .................................. 198
   Inverted AC Motors ................................ 199
   Values ............................................. 199
   How To Use It ..................................... 199
   What Can Go Wrong ................................ 200
   Premature Restart ................................ 200
   Frequent Restart .................................. 200
   Undervoltage Or Voltage Imbalance ............ 200
   Stalled Motor ..................................... 200
   Protective Relays .................................. 200
   Excess Torque ..................................... 200
   Internal Breakage .................................. 200

24. **Servo Motor** ................................. 201
   What It Does ...................................... 201
   How It Works ...................................... 201
   Variants ............................................ 203
   Values ............................................. 204
   How To Use It ..................................... 205
   Modification For Continuous Rotation ........ 206
   What Can Go Wrong ................................ 206
   Incorrect Wiring .................................... 206
   Shaft/Horn Mismatch ............................... 206
   Unrealistically Rapid Software Commands .... 207
   Jitter ............................................... 207
   Motor Overload .................................... 207
25. Stepper Motor ........................................... 209
   What It Does ........................................... 209
   How It Works ........................................... 209
   Reluctance Stepper Motors ......................... 210
   Permanent Magnet Stepper Motors .................. 211
   Bipolar Stepper Motors ............................... 213
   Unipolar Motors ....................................... 213
   Variants ............................................... 214
   High Phase Count ................................... 214
   Hybrid ................................................. 216
   Bifilar .................................................. 216
   Multiphase ............................................. 216
   Microstepping ......................................... 217
   Sensing And Feedback ................................ 217
   Voltage Control ....................................... 217
   Values .................................................. 218
   How To Use It .......................................... 218
   Protection Diodes ................................... 218
   Positional Control ................................... 219
   What Can Go Wrong .................................. 219
   Incorrect Wiring ..................................... 219
   Step Loss .............................................. 219
   Excessive Torque ................................... 219
   Hysteresis ............................................. 220
   Resonance ............................................. 220
   Hunting ............................................... 220
   Saturation ............................................. 220
   Rotor Demagnetization ............................... 220

26. Diode ..................................................... 221
   What It Does .......................................... 221
   How It Works .......................................... 223
   Variants ................................................. 224
   Packaging ............................................. 224
   Signal Diodes ......................................... 224
   Rectifier Diodes ..................................... 224
   Zener Diode ........................................... 224
   Transient Voltage Suppressor (TVS) ................. 225
   Schottky Diode ....................................... 225
   Varactor Diode ....................................... 225
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunnel Diode, Gunn Diode, PIN Diode</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diode Array</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Rectifier</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How To Use It</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rectification</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back-EMF Suppression</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voltage Selection</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voltage Clamping</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logic Gate</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC Voltage Regulation And Noise Suppression</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC Voltage Control And Signal Clipping</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voltage Sensing</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Can Go Wrong</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overload</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reversed Polarity</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong Type Of Diode</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

27. Unijunction Transistor                        | 235  |
| What It Does                                     | 235  |
| How It Works                                     | 236  |
| Variants                                         | 238  |
| Values                                           | 238  |
| How To Use It                                    | 239  |
| What Can Go Wrong                                | 239  |
| Name Confusion                                   | 239  |
| Incorrect Bias                                    | 239  |
| Overload                                         | 240  |

28. Bipolar Transistor                            | 241  |
| What It Does                                     | 241  |
| How It Works                                     | 241  |
| Current Gain                                     | 244  |
| Terminology                                      | 245  |
| Variants                                         | 245  |
| Packaging                                        | 245  |
| Connections                                      | 246  |
| How To Use It                                    | 246  |
| Darlington Pairs                                 | 248  |
| Amplifiers                                       | 250  |
| What Can Go Wrong                                | 251  |
| Wrong Connections On A Bipolar Transistor         | 251  |
| Wrong Connections On A Darlington Pair Chip      | 251  |
| Soldering Damage                                 | 252  |
| Excessive Current Or Voltage                     | 252  |
Excessive Leakage ........................................... 252

29. Field Effect Transistor ............................... 253
   What It Does ........................................... 253
   How It Works ........................................... 253
      JFETs .................................................. 253
      JFET Behavior ....................................... 255
      MOSFETs ............................................. 256
      The Substrate Connection ......................... 261
   Variants .................................................. 262
      MESFET ................................................ 262
      V-Channel MOSFET ................................. 262
      Trench MOS .......................................... 262
   Values .................................................... 262
   How To Use It .......................................... 263
      P-Channel Disadvantage ......................... 263
      Bipolar Substitution ................................ 263
      Amplifier Front Ends ............................... 263
      Voltage-Controlled Resistor ...................... 263
      Compatibility With Digital Devices ............. 263
   What Can Go Wrong ................................... 263
      Static Electricity .................................... 263
      Heat .................................................... 263
      Wrong Bias ........................................... 264

Appendix A. Schematic Symbols ....................... 265

Index ....................................................... 269
At a time when information is widely and freely available in greater quantities than ever before, the reader may wonder whether The Encyclopedia of Electronic Components is really necessary. Surely, anything you want to know can be found online?

Well, yes and no. Let’s consider the available resources.

1. Datasheets

Datasheets are indispensable, but they have limitations. Some are detailed; others are skimpy. Some show you sample schematics as a guide to using a component; many don’t. None of them tells you much about how a component works, because that’s not their purpose. Often they don’t mention other components that must be added. Some datasheets for DC-DC converters, for instance, say nothing at all about bypass capacitors, even though the capacitors may be essential. A datasheet for an optocoupler says nothing about the pullup resistor required by the open-collector output.

Datasheets don’t facilitate comparison shopping. A datasheet from one manufacturer will not compare its products with those from another manufacturer, and may not even provide much guidance about alternatives that are available from the same manufacturer. For example, a datasheet for a linear voltage regulator won’t suggest that you might do better to use a DC-DC converter in an application where high efficiency is important.

Most of all, datasheets don’t tell you how to avoid common mistakes. What actually happens if you connect that tantalum capacitor the wrong way around? A datasheet gives you the customary list of absolute maximum values, and after that, you are on your own, burning things out, encountering mysterious electronic behavior, and discovering limitations that are so well known, the datasheet didn’t bother to mention them. In my experience, relying on datasheets creates a significant risk of reinventing the wheel.

2. Wikipedia

Wikipedia’s coverage of electronics is impressive but inconsistent. Some entries are elementary, while others are extremely technical. Some are shallow, while others are deep. Some are well-organized, while others run off into obscure topics that may have interested one of the contributors but are of little practical value to most readers. Many topics are distributed over multiple entries, forcing you to hunt through several URLs. Overall, Wikipedia tends to be good if you want theory, but not-so-good if you want hands-on practicality.
3. Manufacturers’ Tutorials

A few helpful and enlightened manufacturers have compiled highly authoritative, instructional overviews of the components that they sell. Littelfuse, for instance, publishes an excellent series of documents telling you everything you could possibly want to know about fuses. But now you encounter a different problem: There is so much information, you’ll need a couple of hours to dig through it all. Also, because the tutorials tend not to receive high page rankings on Google, they can be hard to find. And if a manufacturer has gaps in its product line, its tutorial is unlikely to mention them. Consequently, you won’t know what’s missing.

4. Personal Guides

It is a well-known attribute of the Web that many individuals feel the impulse to share everything they know (or think they know) about a particular topic. These personal guides can present surprisingly thorough online coverage of relatively obscure issues, such as the types of capacitors most suitable for loudspeaker crossover circuits, or the correct derivation of amp-hour numbers for lead-acid batteries. Unfortunately, on some sites you can also find errors, unsubstantiated opinions, plagiarism, and eccentricity. My general rule is that three or more guides generally have to agree with each other before their statements can be trusted—and even then, I have a small residue of doubt. The search-inspect-and-verify process can take a while.

So—yes, the information that you want usually does exist somewhere online, but no, it may not be easy to find. The vastness of the Web is not organized like an encyclopedia.

What about books? Generally speaking, they tend to be entry-level, or they specialize in narrow areas. A few broad-ranging books are truly excellent, but they are primarily educational, organized in an instructional sequence. They are not reference books.

The Encyclopedic Solution

Scarcity or inaccessibility of information ceased to be a problem many years ago. Its vast quantity, inconsistency, and dispersal have become the new barriers to acquiring knowledge. If you have to go hunting among datasheets, Wikipedia, manufacturers’ tutorials (which may or may not exist), personal guides (which may have unrevealed bias), and multiple educational books, the process will be inconvenient and time-consuming. If you plan to revisit the topic in the future, you’ll have to remember which URLs were useful and which ones weren’t—and you may find that many of them are not even there anymore.

When I considered these issues during my own work as an electronics columnist for Make magazine, I saw a real need for a fact-checked, cross-referenced encyclopedia that would compile the basic information about components concisely, in an organized, consistent format, with informative photographs, schematics, and diagrams. It might save many people a lot of search time if it could summarize how components work, how to use them, what the alternatives are, and what the common errors and problems may be.

That is the modest ambition of The Encyclopedia of Electronic Components.

The Audience

Like any reference work, this one hopes to serve two categories of readers: The informed and the not-yet-informed.

Perhaps you are learning electronics, and you see a part listed in a catalog. It looks interesting, but the catalog doesn’t tell you exactly what the part does or how it is commonly used. You need to look it up either by function or by name, but you’re not sure where to start. An encyclopedic reference can simplify the fact-finding process, can save you from ordering a part that may be inappropriate, and can tell you how it should be used.
Perhaps, instead, you are an electronics engineer or hobbyist, thinking about a new circuit. You remember using a component three or four years ago, but your recollection may not be reliable. You need to refresh your memory with a quick summary—and so, you open the encyclopedia, just to make sure.

Completeness

Obviously, this book cannot include every component that exists. Mouser Electronics claims to have more than 2 million products listed in its online database. The Encyclopedia of Electronic Components only has room for a fraction of that number—but still, it can refer you to the primary types. The electronic edition of this book should allow easy insertions and updates. My hope is that it can become an ever-expanding resource.

Acknowledgments

Any reference work draws inspiration from many sources, and this one is no exception. Three were of special importance:


I also made extensive use of information gleaned through Mouser Electronics and Jameco Electronics. And where would any of us be without Getting Started in Electronics by Forrest M. Mims III, or The TTL Cookbook by Don Lancaster?

In addition, there were individuals who provided special assistance. My editor, Brian Jepson, was immensely helpful in the development of the project. Michael Butler contributed greatly to the early concept and its structure. Josh Gates did resourceful research. My publishers, O'Reilly Media, demonstrated their faith in my work. Kevin Kelly unwittingly influenced me with his legendary interest in “access to tools.”

Primary fact checkers were Eric Moberg, Chris Lirakis, Jason George, Roy Rabey, Emre Tuncer, and Patrick Fagg. I am indebted to them for their help. Any remaining errors are, of course, my responsibility.

Lastly I should mention my school friends from decades ago: Hugh Levinson, Patrick Fagg, Graham Rogers, William Edmondson, and John Witty, who helped me to feel that it was okay to be a nerdy kid building my own audio equipment, long before the word “nerd” existed.

—Charles Platt, 2012
How to Use This Book

To avoid misunderstandings regarding the purpose and method of this book, here is a quick guide regarding the way in which it has been conceived and organized.

**Reference vs. Tutorial**

As its title suggests, this is a reference book, not a tutorial. In other words, it does not begin with elementary concepts and build sequentially toward concepts that are more advanced.

You should be able to dip into the text at any point, locate the topic that interests you, learn what you need to know, and then put the book aside. If you choose to read it straight through from beginning to end, you will not find concepts being introduced in a sequential, cumulative manner.

My book *Make:Electronics* follows the tutorial approach. Its range, however, is more circumscribed than that of this encyclopedia, because a tutorial inevitably allocates a lot of space to step-by-step explanations and instructions.

**Theory and Practice**

This book is oriented toward practicality rather than theory. I am assuming that the reader mostly wants to know how to use electronic components, rather than why they work the way they do. Consequently I have not included any proofs of formulae, any definitions rooted in electrical theory, or any historical background. Units are defined only to the extent that is necessary to avoid confusion.

Many books on electronics theory already exist, if theory is of interest to you.

**Organization**

The encyclopedia is divided into entries, each entry being devoted to one broad type of component. Two rules determine whether a component has an entry all to itself, or is subsumed into another entry:

1. A component merits its own entry if it is (a) widely used or (b) not-so-widely used but has a unique identity and maybe some historical status. A widely used component would be a bipolar transistor, while a not-so-widely-used component with a unique identity would be a unijunction transistor.
2. A component does not merit its own entry if it is (a) seldom used or (b) very similar in function to another component that is more widely used. For example, the rheostat is sub-
subject-oriented organization of categories and entries in this encyclopedia. Something is assumed into the potentiometer section, while silicon diode, Zener diode, and germanium diode are combined together in the diode entry.

Inevitably, these guidelines required judgment calls that in some cases may seem arbitrary. My ultimate decision was based on where I would expect to find a component if I was looking for it myself.

**Subject Paths**

Entries are not organized alphabetically. Instead they are grouped by subject, in much the same way that books in the nonfiction section of a library are organized by the Dewey Decimal System. This is convenient if you don’t know exactly what you are looking for, or if you don’t know all the options that may be available to perform a task that you have in mind.

Each primary category is divided into subcategories, and the subcategories are divided into component types. This hierarchy is shown in Figure 1-1. It is also apparent when you look at the top of the first page of each entry, where you will find the path that leads to it. The capacitor entry, for instance, is headed with this path:

power > moderation > capacitor

Any classification scheme tends to run into exceptions. You can buy a chip containing a resistor array, for instance. Technically, this is an analog integrated circuit, but should it really be included with solid-state relays and comparators? A decision was made to put it in the resistor section, because this seemed more useful.

Some components have hybrid functions. In Volume 2, in the integrated circuit subcategory, we will distinguish between those that are analog and those that are digital. So where should an analog-digital converter be listed? It will be found under analog, because that category seems better associated with its primary function, and people may be more likely to look for it there.

### Inclusions and Exclusions

There is also the question of what is, and what is not, a component. Is wire a component? Not for...
the purposes of this encyclopedia. How about a **DC-DC converter**? Because converters are now sold in small packages by component suppliers, they have been included as components.

Many similar decisions had to be made on a case-by-case basis. Undoubtedly, some readers will disagree with the outcome, but reconciling all the disagreements would have been impossible. Speaking personally, the best I could do was create a book that is organized in the way that would suit me best if I were using it myself.

**Typographical Conventions**

Throughout this encyclopedia, the names of components that have their own entries are presented in **bold type**. Other important electronics terms or component names are presented in *italics* where they first appear in any one section.

The names of components, and the categories to which they belong, are all set in lower-case type, except where a term is normally capitalized because it is an acronym or a trademark. **Trimpot**, for instance, is trademarked by Bourns, but **trimmer** is not. **LED** is an acronym, but **cap** (abbreviation for **capacitor**) is not.

Where formulae are used, they are expressed in a format that will be familiar to computer programmers but may be unfamiliar to others. The * (asterisk) symbol is used in place of a multiplication sign, while the / (slash symbol) is used to indicate division. Where pairs of parentheses are nested, the most deeply nested pair identifies the operations that should be performed first.

**Volume Contents**

Practical considerations relating to book length influenced the decision to divide *The Encyclopedia of Electronic Components* into three volumes. Each volume deals with broad subject areas as follows.

**Volume 1**

- Power, electromagnetism, and discrete semiconductors.

The **power** category includes sources of power and methods to distribute, store, interrupt, and modify power. The **electromagnetism** category includes devices that exert force linearly, and others that create a turning force. **Discrete semiconductors** include the main types of diodes and transistors.

**Volume 2**

- Integrated circuits, light sources, sound sources, heat sources, and high-frequency sources.

**Integrated circuits** are divided into analog and digital components. **Light sources** range from incandescent bulbs to LEDs and small display screens; some reflective components, such as liquid-crystal displays and e-ink, are also included. **Sound sources** are primarily electromagnetic.

**Volume 3**

- Sensing devices.

The field of sensors has become so extensive, they easily merit a volume to themselves. **Sensing devices** include those that detect light, sound, heat, motion, pressure, gas, humidity, orientation, electricity, proximity, force, and radiation.

At the time of writing, volumes 2 and 3 are still in preparation, but their contents are expected to be as described above.

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