Current Feedback Amplifiers

CURRENT FEEDBACK AMPLIFIERS
This application note will discuss the LH4117, LH4118, and LH4200 amplifiers, their properties, and the current feedback principles involved.

Current feedback amplifiers offer advantages over conventional operational amplifiers, but there are important differences which have to be taken into account. To understand why and how a current feedback amplifier works it is helpful to start with a conventional amplifier.

CONVENTIONAL vs CURRENT FEEDBACK AMPLIFIERS

Conventional Amplifiers
The conventional op-amp has three stages: an input stage configured as a differential amplifier, a gain stage, and an output stage (Figure 1). The diff-amp provides two symmetrical inputs. The open loop gain is independent of the set gain and we have the situation of the gain-bandwidth product being constant. This means when the op-amp is set for higher gains the rolloff starts at a lower frequency (Figure 4).

Gain
Current feedback amplifiers are optimized for speed and have comparatively low open loop gain. Therefore most of them have a recommended gain range.

The basic equations for the gain are the same as for a conventional operational amplifier (see Figure 3):

Inverting gain: \( A_V = -\frac{R_F}{R_G} \)
Non-inverting gain: \( A_V = \frac{R_F}{R_G} + 1 \)

Non-Inverting Gain
\( A_V = 1 + \frac{R_F}{R_G} \)

Inverting Gain
\( A_V = \frac{R_F}{R_G} \)

The inverting input feeds into the emitter of the second stage. This is a low impedance node, and the feedback function is accomplished by injecting current into the emitter. This current then flows through the collector resistor and produces a voltage proportional to the injected current.

The feedback does not reach around the very first stage. This stage operates as an open loop buffer with a voltage gain close to one.

The gain term for current feedback amplifiers is determined by the ratio of collector resistor \( R_C \) over the emitter resistance. The emitter resistance is determined by the paralleling of three resistors (Figure 2 and Figure 3): the feedback resistor \( R_F \), the gain-setting resistor \( R_G \) and the resistance of the current source, which, at frequencies below the rolloff, is high compared to \( R_F \) and \( R_G \) and can be neglected.

If \( R_F \) is held constant, \( R_G \) becomes smaller as the amplifier is set for higher gains. Thus the node resistance in the emitter is decreased and the gain of the stage increased, and with it the open loop gain. This higher \( A_{OL} \) is the reason why the bandwidth of current mode amplifiers is almost independent of the set gain \( A_V \) (Figure 4).

Current Feedback Amplifiers

Topology
The current feedback amplifier (Figure 2) has an input stage configured as an emitter follower (or source follower for a FET input). This makes for an inherently faster response, because the input stage runs at unity voltage gain and therefore has less Miller capacitance.
FIGURE 4. Gain Characteristics of Conventional vs Current Feedback Amplifiers

The inverting input of a current mode amplifier is inherently sensitive to capacitance. The reason is that at higher frequencies the gain of the stage is increased and at this high gain the amplifier tends to become unstable. Peaking the amplifier with a small capacitor from the inverting input to ground will work, since the increase in gain is held small. However, a capacitor across the feedback resistor to reduce peaking will almost always result in instabilities, because it increases the gain of the stage and in addition affects the phase margin.

Equations for Voltage Gain

The connection between gain and bandwidth can be shown in the basic equations as well. For the conventional amplifier the voltage gain is determined by

$$\frac{1}{AV} = \frac{1}{AOL} + \frac{1}{G}, \quad (eq. \ 1)$$

with the non-inverting gain set to

$$G = \frac{R_F}{R_G} + 1 \quad (eq. \ 2)$$

Equation 1 is written in reciprocal values because this makes the interrelations between the parameters easier to understand. For low G the term 1/G dominates and AV becomes approximately equal to G and independent of frequency until at higher frequencies AOV drops drastically. For higher G this crossover from a frequency independent characteristic following G to a rolloff characteristic following AOV occurs at lower frequency. Therefore: the higher the set gain G the lower the bandwidth.

For the current feedback amplifier (see Figure 2 and 3) the open loop gain can be set to

$$AOL = \left( \frac{R_c}{R_G \times R_F / (R_G + R_F)} \right) \times A1 \quad (eq. \ 3)$$

The first factor describes the gain of the feedback stage and A1 the open loop gain of the stages following it. Equation 3 substituted into eq. 1 becomes

$$\frac{1}{AV} = \frac{1}{G} \left( \frac{R_F}{R_c \times A1} + 1 \right)$$

Equation 4 consists of two factors. The first one, 1/G, is independent of frequency, the second one is independent of gain. This shows that the pole structure and the rolloff characteristic of the second factor, which includes A1, are preserved independent of G. The factor 1/G only scales the gain characteristic. This shows that the bandwidth becomes independent of the set gain G, because bandwidth is defined as the frequency at which the gain drops by 3 dB, no matter how large the gain is.

Gainsetting Resistors

As in conventional op-amps the gain is set by RF and RG (Figure 3), but with the provision that the resistor values be right for the amplifier. This is necessary because the gain of the feedback stage is set by the impedance on the inverting input. Normally a value of RF is recommended for any given amplifier and very often RF is built in.

Over-Compensation

To over-compensate means to reduce the bandwidth. One reason why this is done is to reduce excessive peaking and associated ringing when pulses are amplified. On a current feedback amplifier this reduction of bandwidth can be accomplished by increasing RF. For a given voltage gain this increases RG as well and the inverting input sees a higher impedance. This reduces the open loop gain (see section on Gain), and with it AOV and the bandwidth.

In amplifiers where inverting input and output are internally connected through RF this method cannot be used. Here it will be necessary to use an external filter to reduce the bandwidth.

Excessive Peaking

When the set gain G is low, on some current mode amplifiers the gain vs. frequency curve tends to peak at high frequencies. This is especially prevalent in current mode amplifiers which are optimized for high gains.

The reason for this is as follows: For lower gains the gain setting resistor RG is larger and at some frequency the stray capacitance of the inverting input node, in parallel with RG, becomes dominant and increases the gain of the amplifier. When RG is low, as it is for high gain settings, this crossover frequency becomes so high that it falls outside the amplifier’s frequency range and therefore is of no consequence.

Reducing the bandwidth slightly by increasing the value of RF (see section on “Reducing the Bandwidth”) will reduce the peaking. An R-C filter in the non-inverting input will compensate the peaking with rolloff and thereby also reduce peaking, but it will reduce the ringing associated with the peaking response only to a degree, because the frequency rolloff is outside the feedback loop.

Offset Voltages

For a DC coupled current mode amplifier there are two offset voltages. One is the output offset: it is the input voltage required on the non-inverting input to make the output 0V. This offset voltage varies for different gain settings G. The other offset is the input offset, which is the voltage between inverting and non-inverting input. It, too, is dependent on the gain setting.
To adjust the input-to-output offset to zero, a current can be injected into the inverting input (Figure 5a), or a voltage can be added to the non-inverting input (Figure 5b).

The method of adding a voltage to the non-inverting input can also be used to zero the offset voltage between the inputs, while injecting a current into the inverting input will not accomplish this well. The reason is that the input offset is the difference in voltage drop of two base-emitter diodes (transistors Q1 and Q2 in Figure 2). Because of the exponential characteristic, a large percentage change in current is needed to shift a diode-drop to the required value.

**Capacitive Loads**

Care has to be taken when driving capacitive loads. Since the current feedback amplifiers have a wide bandwidth, even small capacitors of 200 pF or less need attention.

One limitation is the charge current, which the amplifier has to supply:

\[ I = C \times \frac{dV}{dt} \]

Usually more stringent is the question of stability. The capacitor shifts the phase because the output voltage lags the output current and the phase margin of the amplifier deteriorates because the phase angle of the amplifier was negative to start with.

Very small capacitors (e.g., 10 pF) have significant phase shift only at high frequencies beyond the amplifier’s rolloff and therefore do not cause problems. Larger capacitances can be paralleled with a resistive load to improve the phase angle of the load. For large capacitive loads a series resistor is recommended (about 10Ω to 50Ω). The amplifier will be stable, but the frequency response will be slower.

**LH4117**

The LH4117 is a current feedback amplifier with a FET input. It is optimized for gains from 5 to 50. It has typically 150 MHz bandwidth, 6000 V/μs slew rate, and 9 ns settling time to 0.2% (typical values).

The LH4117 (Figure 6) has a FET input stage with Q1 working as a source follower and another FET providing bias and VOS drift compensation (Q2). The rest of the stages are symmetrical. Two stages of emitter followers (Q3–Q6) amplify current with close to unity voltage gain. The emitters of the complementary pair Q5 and Q6 are the node for the inverting input. The feedback network injects current into this node. A feedback resistor RF of 1500Ω is built into the device. Q7 and Q8 form the gain stage, which is followed by a push-pull emitter follower output pair.

**Using the LH4117 as a Transimpedance Amplifier for DAC Outputs**

The LH4117 is an excellent match to amplify the output of DACs like the DAC0800. The fast settling time of 9 ns to 0.02% does not degrade the performance of the DAC. On the other hand, the DAC0800 provides complimentary current outputs, which are current sinks and do not need a fixed voltage (like virtual ground) to work accurately.

**FIGURE 5. Adjusting Offset Voltage**

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FIGURE 6. Simplified Schematic of the LH4117

FIGURE 7. Fast Current-to-Voltage Current Mode DAC Amplifier
thereby increasing the gain of the stage. The LH4117 is not compensated for such high gain, and therefore tends to become unstable.

The output voltage of the LH4117 is derived in the following way: The DAC's output current $I_1$ also flows through the feedback resistor $R_F$ of 1500Ω, which is built into the LH4117, driving the output of the amplifier high in relation to the inverting input. The non-inverting input, pin 4, is driven low by the voltage drop which is generated by the current $I_2$ flowing through $R_6 + R_7 = 1500Ω$. Since the amplifier causes inverting and non-inverting input to have the same voltage, the voltage at its pin 4 is added to the output:

$$V_{OUT} = I_1 \times R_F - I_2 \times (R_6 + R_7).$$

With $I_1 + I_2 = I_{REF}$

and

$$R_6 + R_7 = R_F$$

this can be written as

$$V_{OUT} = 2 \times R_F \times I_1 - I_{REF} \times R_F$$

With $I_{REF} = 2$ mA and $R_F = 1500Ω$, it can be seen that for $I_1 = 0$ the output is $-3V$ (all logic inputs LOW), and for $I_1 = 2$ mA the output is $+3V$ (all logic inputs HIGH).

**Trimming**

Due to inaccuracies of resistors and offset voltage in the amplifier the circuit will need trimming. This is accomplished by setting the maximum output voltage to $+3V$ (logic inputs HIGH), and the minimum output voltage to $-3V$ (logic inputs LOW).

$R_1$ will change the reference current $I_{REF}$ and with it both extremes of the output voltage. The resistor $R_7$ will influence only the negative extreme.

The trim procedure is to set all logic inputs HIGH and trim $R_1$ until the output voltage is $+3V$, then set all inputs LOW and trim $R_7$ until $V_{OUT} = -3V$.

**Results**

After trim the linearity was tested and shown to be within $\pm 10$ mV from the ideal value. This corresponds to 0.17% of full scale or less than $\frac{1}{2}$ LSB.

Settling time is below 135 ns. The settling time of the LH4117 is 9 ns and does not contribute noticeably to the total settling time. Figure 8 shows the output waveform when the MSB is switched.

\[\text{FIGURE 8. Pulse Response of the DAC0800-LH4117 Combination}\]

\[\text{LH4118}\]

The LH4118 is a current feedback amplifier optimized for gains from 1 to 9. It has bandwidth of over 200 MHz, good noise characteristics (typical 1.3 nV/V Hz) and 125 mA output current capability.

The topology of the LH4118 is close to what has been discussed for current feedback amplifiers, except that the device is symmetrical throughout (Figure 9). The input has an NPN and a PNP transistor which feed their emitter currents into a push-pull feedback stage. Gain and output stages are in push-pull configuration as well. The input has a small series resistor which helps the stability of the amplifier making sure that the real part of the input impedance is always positive. The direct non-inverting input is fed out as well. It can be used to limit the bandwidth of the amplifier by connecting a small capacitor to ground.

**Fiber Optic Receiver Using the LH4118**

Figure 10 shows the LH4118 as a photo diode receiver. The pin diode is excited by the incoming light (Figure 11 shows the optical transmitter which was used in the test setup). The current generated in the PIN diode causes a voltage drop across resistor $R_1$. This voltage is then amplified by the LH4118.

It is important to hold the capacitance at the input small. This capacitance consists of the diode, amplifier input and wiring capacitance. Together with the load resistor $R_1$ it determines the frequency rolloff at the input. This is also the reason for choosing a small value for $R_1$.
Pins 2 and 7 can also be left disconnected (floating).

**The built-in 150Ω can be used as feedback resistor for $A_v = 1$.

**FIGURE 9. LH4118 Simplified Schematic**

**FIGURE 10. Fiber Optic Receiver Using the LH4118**
A guard around the input node driven from the feedback point helps to reduce the input capacitance. If the PIN diode has a metal case it should also be connected to the driven guard. If this constitutes too much capacitance for the inverting input and therefore causes the gain characteristic to peak, a separate voltage divider from the output can be used to drive the shield.

For the same reason the anode of the PIN diode (Hewlett Packard HFBR2208) is connected to the inverting input. This connection is made through a 1000 pF capacitor C1 because of the different DC potentials.

The resistor R2 is needed to decouple the bias supply from the inverting input. For high frequencies it is parallel with the input and therefore needs to be high compared to RG.

The power gain of the receiver can be written as

\[ P_G = 10 \log \left( \frac{R_P \times R_1 \times A_V}{R_L} \right) \]

where

- \( R_P \) — responsivity of the PIN diode, typically 0.384 A/W,
- \( R_1 \) — the diode’s series resistor, 1000Ω
- \( A_V \) — non inverting voltage gain of the amplifier, 8.5
- \( R_L \) — output load of the amplifier, 50Ω

With the above values the expected power gain becomes 33.3 dB. This is well in keeping with the actually measured values (see Figure 12).

Figure 13 shows input and output signal for a 20 MHz squarewave, and Figure 14 shows the same for a 100 MHz squarewave.
Like with all high frequency circuits, care has to be taken with proper layout. Lead lengths should be short, a copper clad PC board needs to provide a ground plane, the power supplies should be bypassed with 0.01 μF (C2, C3, C5, C6) no more than 1/4 inch from the pins.

R3 and R4 protect the output from momentary overload. In this application this is not critical, but it is good practice since it is easy and does not affect the performance.

LH4200

The LH4200 is a current feedback amplifier with an operating range from about 1 MHz to 1 GHz. Its input is a dual gate GaAs-FET and it uses a single 10V supply. It is therefore especially useful in video and RF applications. It has a low noise figure of 3 dB at 50Ω source resistance and can supply 40 mA. Power supply bypass capacitors are built into the device.

Figure 15 shows the schematic of the LH4200. The first stage is constructed with a dual gate GaAs-FET. Therefore caution has to be exercised with electrostatic discharge (ESD).

### Table 16. Typical S-Parameters for the LH4200

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MHz</th>
<th>S11</th>
<th>S21</th>
<th>S12</th>
<th>S22</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mag</td>
<td>Ang</td>
<td>Mag</td>
<td>Ang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>0.97</td>
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<td>500</td>
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<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>750</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both gates are non-inverting inputs and are internally biased to ground. Input 1 is intended for the signal. Input 2 sets the gain and needs to be biased to approximately +1V for optimal gain and bandwidth. It can also be used to regulate the gain of the amplifier in AGC applications. It needs to be bypassed with 0.01 μF close to the pin. The voltage range on gate 1 is from -4V to +1.4V, on gate 2 from -4V to +2.5V.

The inverting input is connected to the source of the GaAs-FET. The source load resistor is 50Ω and is fixed. This is also the gain setting resistor. In using a fixed RG the LH4200 differs from most current feedback amplifiers which have a fixed RF and set the gain with different values of RG. The feedback resistor RF is external and, because of the difference in DC potential, needs to be AC-coupled through a 0.01 μF capacitor (see Figure 16).

Another characteristic of the LH4200 is that it is permissible to bypass the inverting input with a capacitor to ground. The amplifier is compensated in a way that this results in stable operation, and the open loop gain is increased, which is beneficial for AGC operation.

First and second stage are capacitively coupled. The low corner frequency is about 2 MHz. Both input and output stages have built-in power supply bypassing.

A gain stage drives the output stage which is single ended, configured as an emitter follower with 150Ω connected to ground.

Feedback Amplifier Using the LH4200

The feedback amplifier in Figure 17 works in a 50Ω system. Gate 2 is DC-biased to +1V. The 33Ω in series with pin 21, together with the built-in power supply decoupling capacitor of the input stage, act as a filter. The power supply is additionally bypassed with a 47 μF and a 1000 pF capacitor. Because pin 17 has DC bias it is connected to the output of the amplifier through a 0.01 μF capacitor.

The table included in Figure 17 shows values for RF and CP for three different gain settings. At high gain settings (RF = 1500Ω, AV = 33 dB) the gain vs. frequency characteristic rolls off in a rounded fashion (Figure 18, curve a); a peaking capacitor CP will extend the flat response (curve b). For RF = 860Ω the gain becomes 25 dB and at this setting a peaking capacitor is not needed (curve c).
Note: Pinout shown for D24D package.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gain</th>
<th>Bandwidth</th>
<th>$R_F$</th>
<th>$C_P$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 dB</td>
<td>150 MHz</td>
<td>1.5k</td>
<td>9–50 pF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 dB</td>
<td>300 MHz</td>
<td>860k</td>
<td>&lt;8 pF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 dB</td>
<td>500 MHz</td>
<td>430k</td>
<td>&lt;1 pF</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**FIGURE 17. Feedback Amplifier Using the LH4200**

For still lower $R_F$ the amplifier tends to peak. Low gains without peaking can be obtained by using $R_F \approx 860k\Omega$ and adjusting the DC voltage at gate 2 from +1V to a lower value (Figure 18, curve d). This causes the $g_{m2}$ of the GaAs-FET to decrease, and with it drops the gain of the input stage. The gain of the input GaAs-FET is outside the feedback loop and therefore the gain of the amplifier is reduced. This way flat gain characteristics can be achieved to as low as about 10 dB, with bandwidths above 400 MHz.

With a supply voltage of +10V the gain vs. frequency characteristics of the LH4200 stay the same up to output voltages of about 3.2 Vpp (14 dBm). Above this level the signal gets clipped. (For more information see the graph on 1 dB compression, Figure 19).

**FIGURE 18. LH4200 Typical Amplifier Response**

If not otherwise noted, $C_P = 0$ and $V_{G2} = 1V$.

**FIGURE 19. Signal Handling Capabilities of the LH4200**

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