

Strain gauge lab – Part 1

In this lab, you will make measurements of mechanical strain in small aluminum beams as you bend them. We will continue this lab next week, so you will want to be careful to maintain your circuit so you can start where we leave off.

The strain gauge

The strain gauge is nothing more than a resistor whose value changes when it is elongated or compressed. When elongated, the small wires which make up the strain gauge get longer and thinner and the resistance goes up. When compressed the wires get shorter and fatter and the resistance goes down. When a strain gauge is stretched, its resistance changes according to the following formula

$$\frac{\Delta R}{R} = G_F \epsilon$$

where G_F is the gauge factor (it is 2.1 for our sensors), ϵ is the mechanical strain, R is the starting resistance (120 Ω in our case) and ΔR is the change in resistance. Since strain is usually quite small, the change in resistance is also quite small. The mechanical strain is defined as the change in length of an object when a force is applied divided by the length with no load.

Measuring the change in resistance

The classic circuit for measuring resistance change is the Wheatstone bridge, shown below in Figure 1 (left). In our case, the nominal resistance of the strain gauge is 120 Ω when no load is applied. If all the resistances are precise, the bridge is balanced. At the midpoint between the resistors on the left and right branch, the voltage is 2.5V on each side. Thus, when you measure the difference you see 0V at no mechanical strain. If the resistance of the strain sensor then changes, you would measure a slight voltage difference across V_{meas} , which is related to the resistance change of the strain gauge.

Unfortunately, real resistors come with finite tolerances (e.g., $\pm 1\%$ for most of the resistors we use) and their nominal values are not always those we would like to use (e.g., the closest standard value for 1% resistors to 120 Ω is 121 Ω). Consequently, we typically add a variable resistor (a trim potentiometer or “pot”) to the bridge, as shown in Figure 1 (right), in order to balance it manually. To do so, we adjust the pot so that under a no load condition until the measured voltage difference is 0V. Once the bridge is balanced, we can sense small changes in resistance at the strain gauge. The voltage difference from the Wheatstone bridge (resulting from a change in the strain gauge's resistance) is very small and must be amplified. To perform the amplification, we will use an instrumentation amplifier, which we discussed in class.

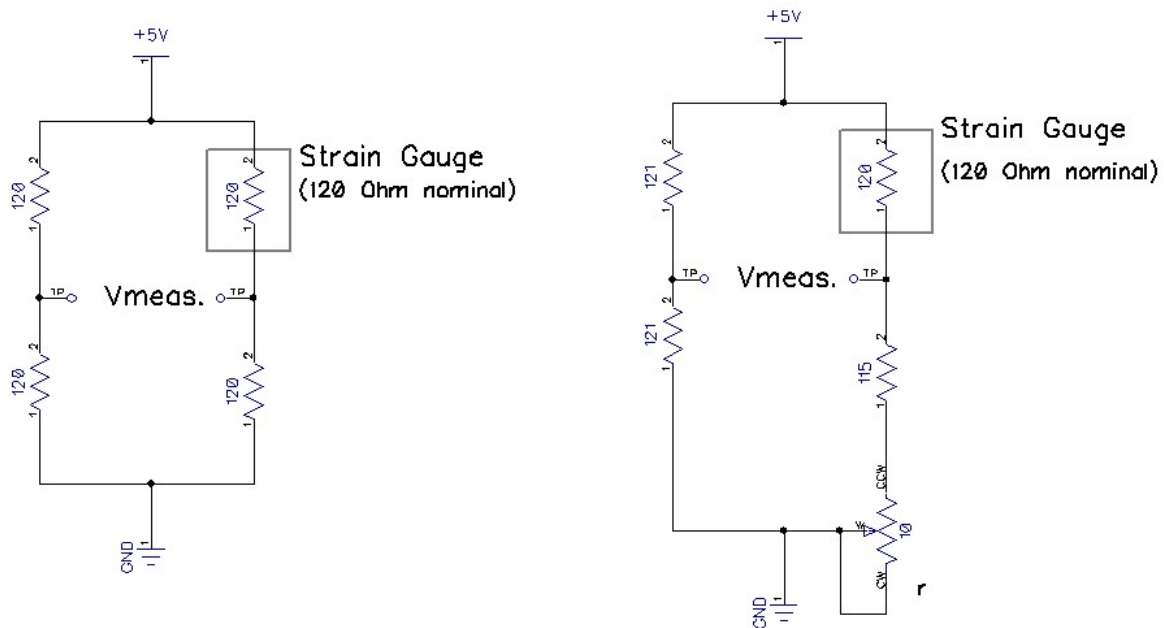


Figure 1: Classic Wheatstone bridge for sensing small changes in resistance. On the left is a classic bridge with perfectly matched resistors. On the right, we use a potentiometer to balance the bridge such that the measured voltage is 0 when the strain gauge is unloaded.

We will start by building the basic circuit, not with the strain gauge, but using a 121 Ω resistor instead. Build the circuit in Figure 2 but don't add the 100K resistor yet. Note the schematic uses a capacitor with a value of 100 picofarads (pf). We have not discussed capacitors yet (next week). Here the capacitor only helps with noise and interference. The capacitor helps remove radio frequency noise, but does not influence the basic operation of the circuit.

Once you have the circuit built, run the Analog Discovery to display the measurements in real time. Hook up the positive input of channel 1 on the Analogy Discovery to measure the voltage at the output of the instrumentation amplifier. Hook the negative input of channel 1 to the 2.5V ref. Adjust the potentiometer to balance the bridge and set the measured voltage on channel 1 to zero as best you can. It is not crucial that it is perfectly zero, in fact it is likely to jump a little when you take the screwdriver off the potentiometer.

Once the bridge is balanced, add a 100K resistor in parallel to the 121 Ω resistor which is the stand-in for your strain gauge; see Figure 2. The 100K resistor in parallel with the 121 Ω resistor makes the resistor in the upper right branch of the bridge have an effective resistance slightly less than 121 Ω . Watch the Analog Discovery, as it is running pull the 100K resistor out of the circuit by hand.

You should see a sudden change in voltage when you pull the resistor. This change is a stand-in for the change in resistance of the strain gauge.

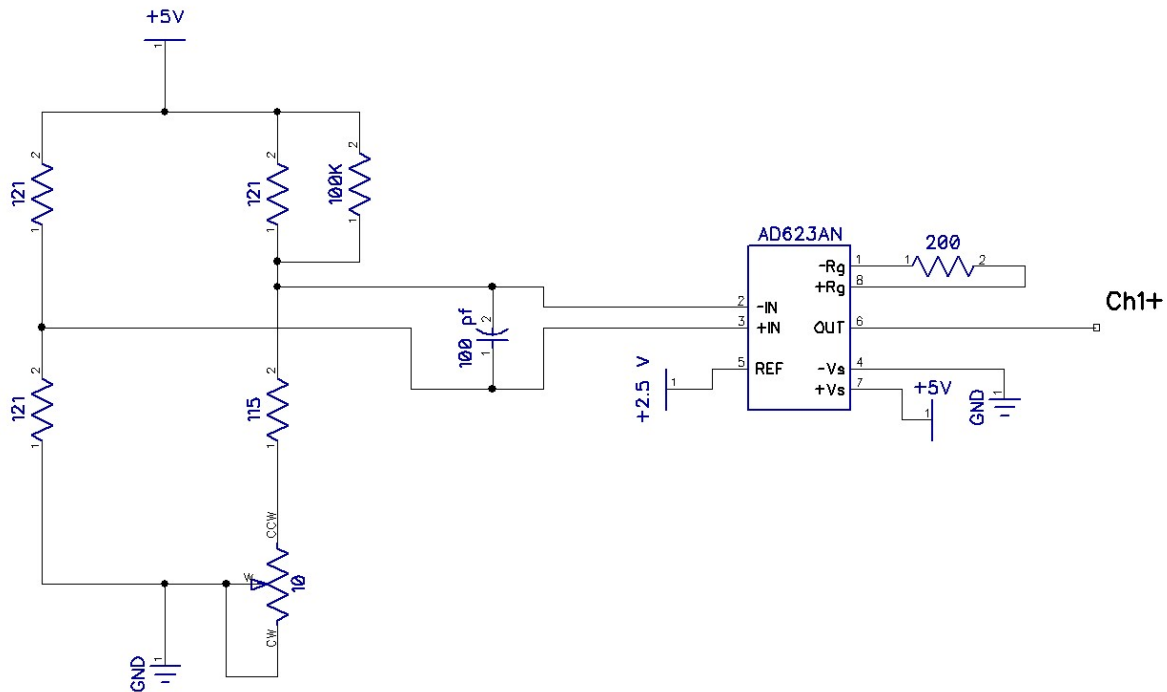


Figure 2: The 121 Ω resistor in the upper right branch of the bridge is the stand-in for the strain gauge. The change in the measured output as the 100K resistor is added is a stand in for the change in resistance in the strain gauge circuit.

Repeat the experiment with a 499K and 1M resistor instead of the 100K. Derive an expression for the change in the voltage that you measure at the output to the change in the resistance of the upper right branch of the bridge circuit. Compare this result with what you measured at 100K, 499K and 1M. You should get good agreement.

Now replace the 121 Ω resistor with the strain gauge. These are 3-wire measurements which is a special arrangement which reduces error in the measurement due to changes in the resistance of the wire leads from the sensor to your circuit board. See Figure 3 for the final strain gauge measurement circuit.

Get one of the beams with the strain gauge already mounted on them. Check the quality of the connections – both electrical and mechanical. If there are not enough beams with good gauges

attached, follow the directions on the website to mount a new strain gauge to a small beam. Cantilever the beam using a bar clamp to the edge of your desk. The strain gauge should be just hanging over the edge of the desk. Re-balance the bridge by adjusting the potentiometer. Once it is balanced, try pushing down on the end of the beam with your finger and you should see the voltage change. Push up and it should change in the other direction. Flick it and you should see damped oscillations. When you unload the beam, the signal should return to zero. Note that it is probably impossible to perfectly balance things. This is fine. It is really only the change that is important anyway.

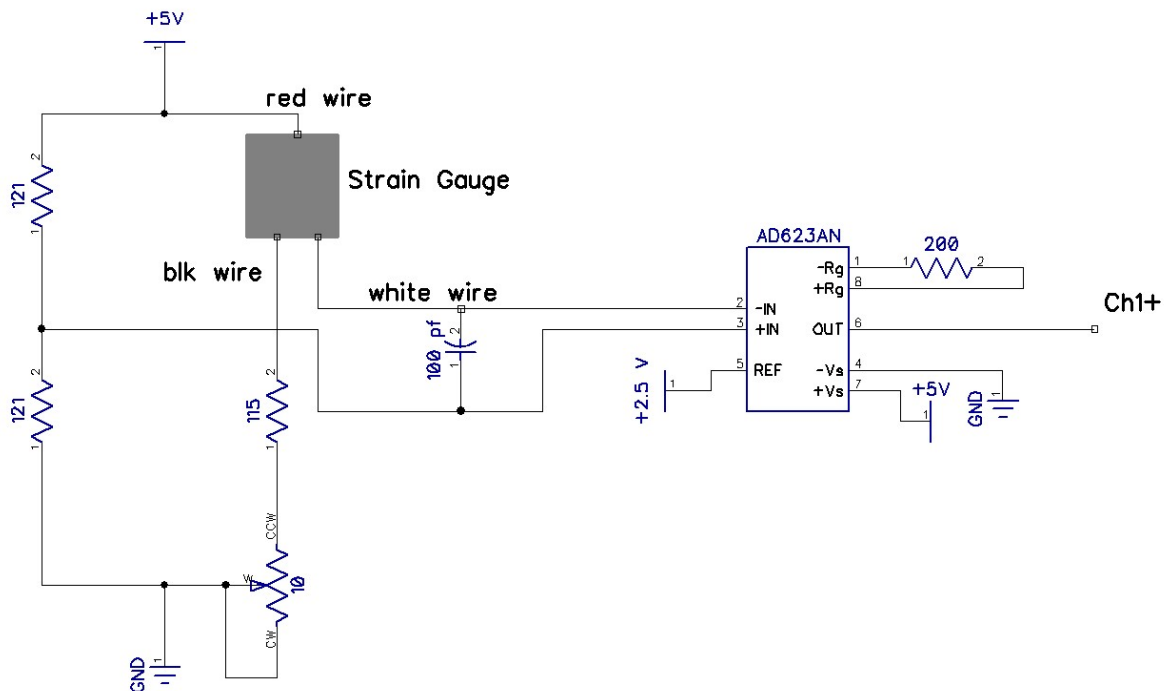


Figure 3: Final strain gauge circuit.

Deliverables:

Things that should be part of your lab report are:

- 1) An analysis of the circuit that provides a relationship between the measured voltage at the instrumentation amplifier output to the change in resistance on the Wheatstone bridge. Compare this analysis to the measurement with the 100K, 499 K, and 1M resistor.
- 2) A single plot of circuit output as a function of time as you add one weight instantaneously.
- 3) Comment on how small a resistance change you believe you can sense with this circuit.