ATTENUATORS / FILTERS / DC BLOCKS

ATTENUATORS

An attenuator is a passive microwave component which, when inserted in the signal path of a system, reduces the signal by a specified amount. They normally possess a low VSWR which makes them ideal for reducing load VSWR in order to reduce measurement uncertainties. They are sometimes used simply to absorb power, either to reduce it to a measurable level, or in the case of receivers to establish an exact level to prevent overload of following stages.

Attenuators are classified as either fixed or variable and either reflective or non-reflective. The fixed and variable attenuators are available in both waveguide and coaxial systems. Most of the receivers under 20 GHz use coaxial type attenuators.

FIXED

The performance characteristics of a fixed attenuator are:

1. input and output impedances
2. flatness with frequency
3. average and peak power handling capability
4. temperature dependence

VARIABLE

The variable attenuator can be subdivided into two kinds: step attenuator and continuously variable attenuator. In a step attenuator, the attenuation is changed in steps such as 10 dB, 1 dB or 0.5 dB. In a continuously variable attenuator, the attenuation is changed continuously and a dial is usually available to read the attenuation either directly or indirectly from a calibration chart.

For a variable attenuator, additional characteristics should be considered, such as:

1. amount or range of attenuations
2. insertion loss in the minimum attenuation position
3. incremental attenuation for step attenuator
4. accuracy of attenuation versus attenuator setting
5. attenuator switching speed and switching noise.

REFLECTIVE

A reflective attenuator reflects some portion of the input power back to the driving source. The amount reflected is a function of the attenuation level. When PIN diodes are zero or reverse biased, they appear as open circuits when shunting a transmission line. This permits most of the RF input power to travel to the RF output. When they are forward biased, they absorb some input, but simultaneously reflect some back to the input port. At high bias current, most RF will be reflected back to the input resulting in a high input VSWR and high attenuation.

ABSORPTIVE

The VSWR of a non-reflective (absorptive) PIN diode attenuator remains good at any attenuation level (bias state). This is accomplished by configuring the diodes in the form of a Pi network that remains matched for any bias state or by use of a 90° hybrid coupler to cancel the waves reflected to the input connector.

MICROWAVE FILTERS

INTRODUCTION

Microwave filters are one of the most important components in receivers. The main functions of the filters are: (1) to reject undesirable signals outside the filter pass band and (2) to separate or combine signals according to their frequency. A good example for the latter application is the channelized receiver in which banks of filters are used to separate input signals. Sometimes filters are also used for impedance matching. Filters are almost always used before and after a mixer to reduce spurious signals due to image frequencies, local oscillator feedthrough, and out-of-frequency band noise and signals. There are many books which are devoted to filter designs. There are many kinds of filters used in microwave receivers, so it is impossible to cover all of them.

If a filter is needed on the output of a jammer, it is desirable to place it approximately half way between the jammer and antenna vs adjacent to either. The transmission line attenuation improves the VSWR of the filter at the transmitter. This may allow use of a less expensive filter, or use of a reflective filter vs an absorptive filter.

A filter is a two-port network which will pass and reject signals according to their frequencies. There are four kinds of filters according to their frequency selectivities. In the examples that follow, f_L = low frequency, f_M = medium frequency, and f_H = high frequency. Their names reflect their characteristics, and they are:

1. A low-pass filter which passes the low frequency signals below a predetermined value as shown in Figure 1.

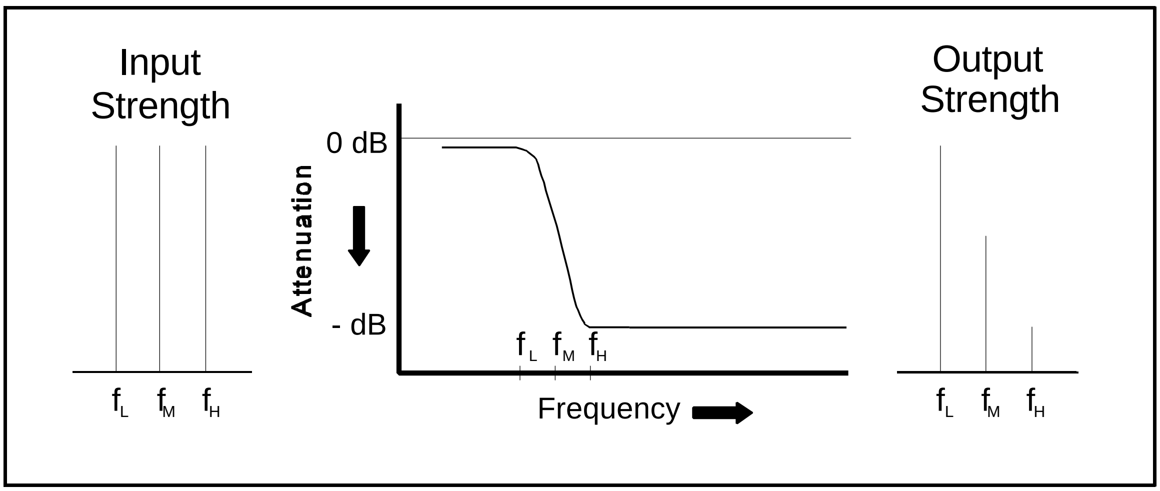

Figure 1. Low-Pass Filter

2. A high-pass filter which passes the high frequency signals above a predetermined value as in Figure 2.

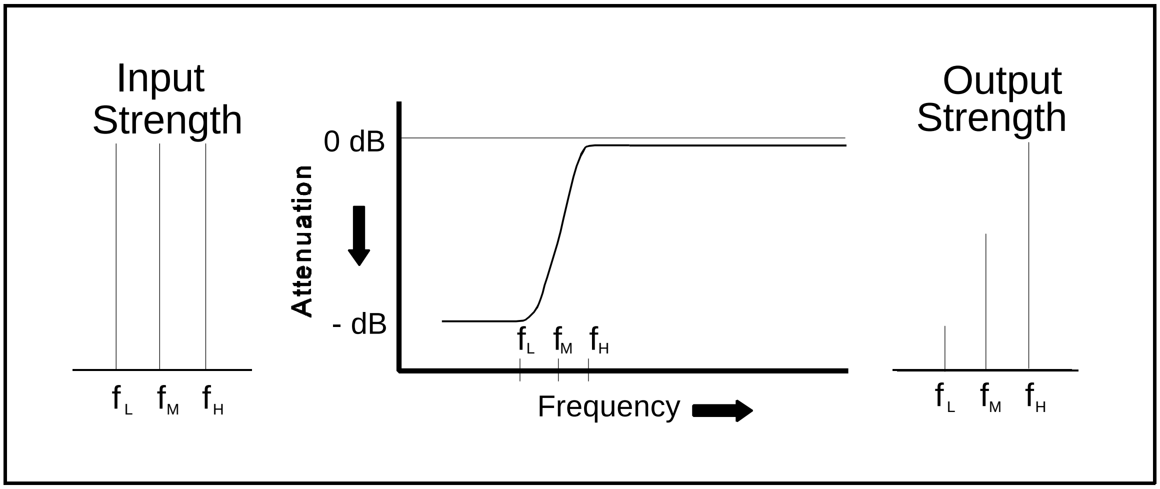

Figure 2. High-Pass Filter

3. A band-pass filter which passes signals between two predetermined frequencies as shown in Figure 3.

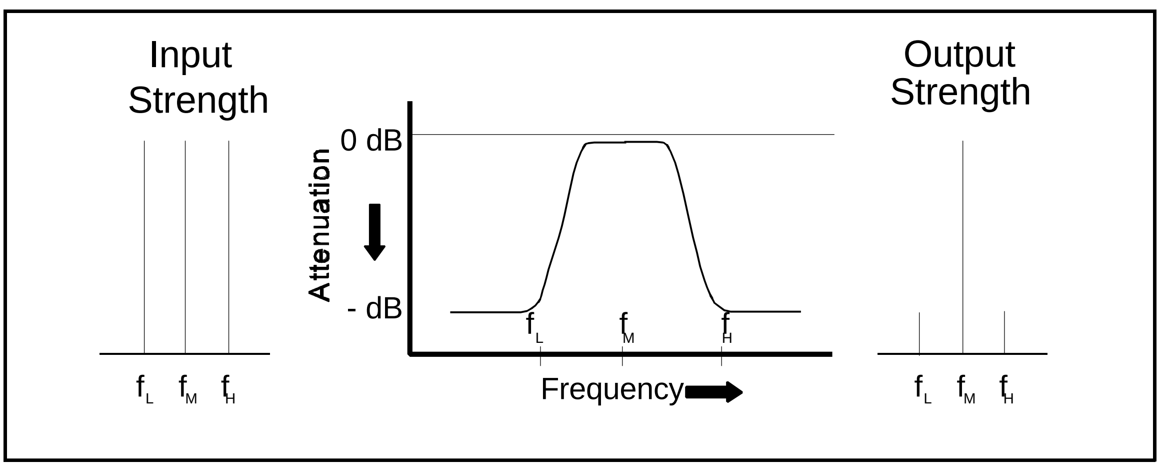

Figure 3. Band-Pass Filter

A band-pass filter with different skirt slopes on the two sides of the pass band is sometimes referred to as an asymmetrical filter. In this filter the sharpness of the rejection band attenuation is significantly different above and below the center frequency. One additional note regarding band-pass filters or filters in general, their performance should always be checked in the out-of-band regions to determine whether or not they posses spurious responses. In particular they should be checked at harmonics of the operating frequency.

4. A band reject filter (sometimes referred to as a bandstop or notch filter) which rejects signals between two predetermined frequencies such as high power signals from the aircraft's own radar as shown in Figure 4.

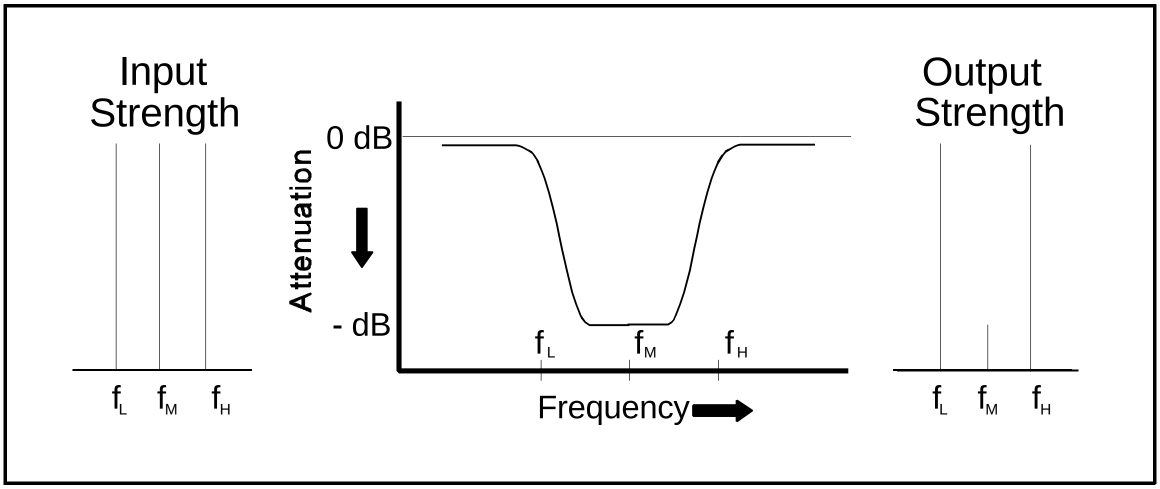

Figure 4. Band-Reject Filter

In general, filters at microwave frequencies are composed of resonate transmission lines or waveguide cavities that, when combined, reflect the signal power outside the filter frequency pass band and provide a good VSWR and low loss within the frequency pass band. As such, specifications for filters are maximum frequency, pass band loss, VSWR, and rejection level at a frequency outside of the pass band. The trade-offs for filters are a higher rejection for a fixed frequency pass band or a larger frequency pass band for a fixed rejection, which requires a filter with more resonators, which produce higher loss, more complexity, and larger size.

DC BLOCKS

DC Blocks are special connectors which have a capacitor (high pass filter) built into the device. There are three basic types:

1. INSIDE - The high pass filter is in series with the center conductor as shown in Figure 5. DC is blocked on the center conductor.

2. OUTSIDE - The high pass filter is in series with the cable shield as shown in Figure 6.

3. INSIDE/OUTSIDE - A high pass arrangement is connected to both the inner and outer conductors.

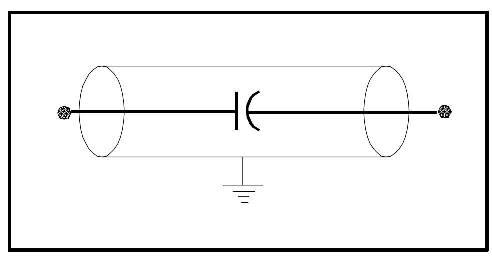

Figure 5. Inside DC Block

DC Blocks are ideal for filtering DC, 60 Hz, and 400 Hz from the RF line.

In general, capacitors with a large value of capacitance do not have the least loss at microwave frequencies. Also, since capacitance is proportional to size, a large size produces more capacitance with more inductance. Because of these reasons, D.C. blocks are typically available with a high pass frequency band starting in the region of 0.1 to 1 GHz.

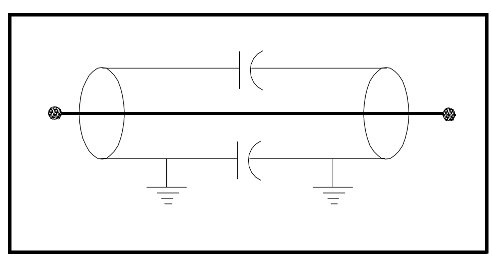

Figure 6. Outside DC Block