COURSE OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Signals and Noise
- Filtering
- Sensors: PD3 - Semiconductor PhotoDiodes

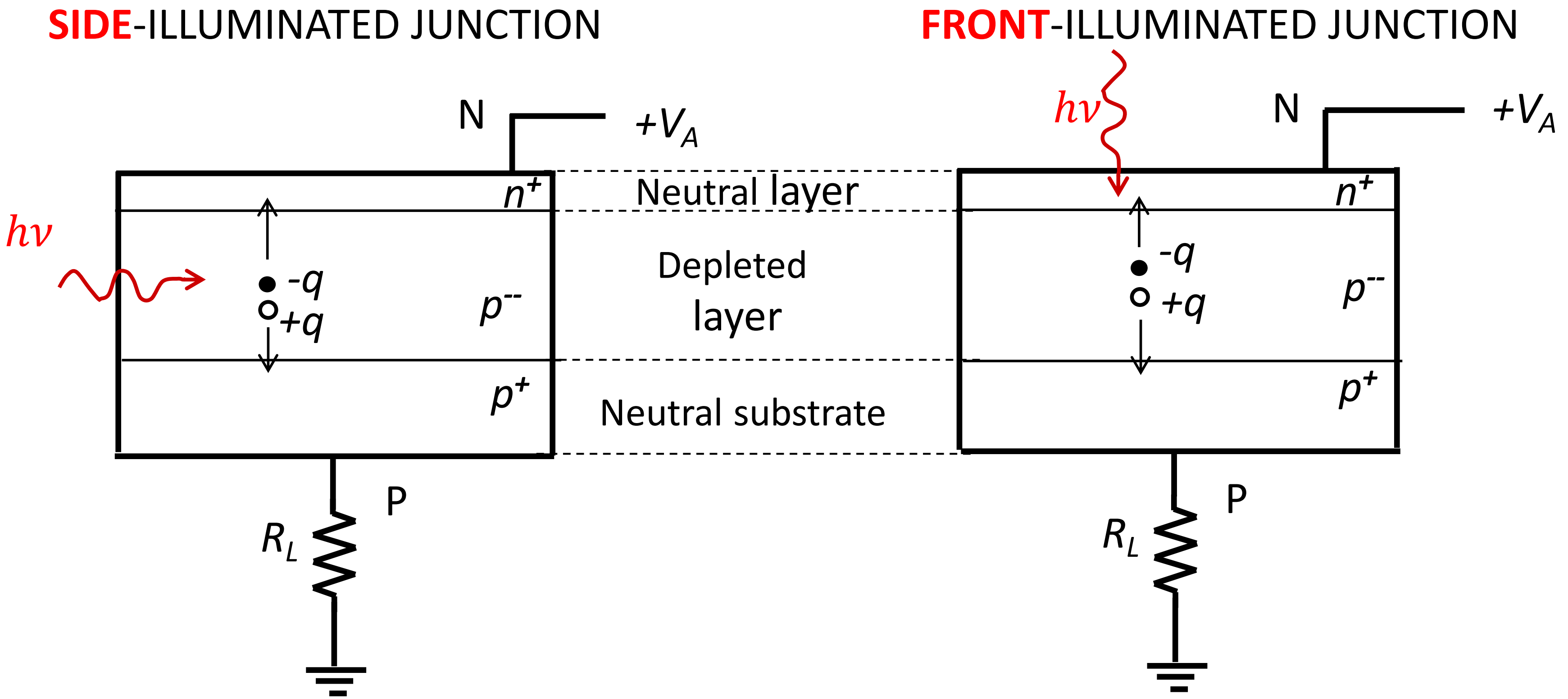
Semiconductor Photo-Diodes (PD)

- Semiconductor PhotoDiode (PD) devices and carrier motion
- I-V characteristics and stationary equivalent circuit of PDs
- Dark-Current, sensitive area, and photon detection efficiency
- Current signal in PDs and dynamic response

PhotoDiode (PD) devices and carrier motion

Basic Device Structure of Photodiodes

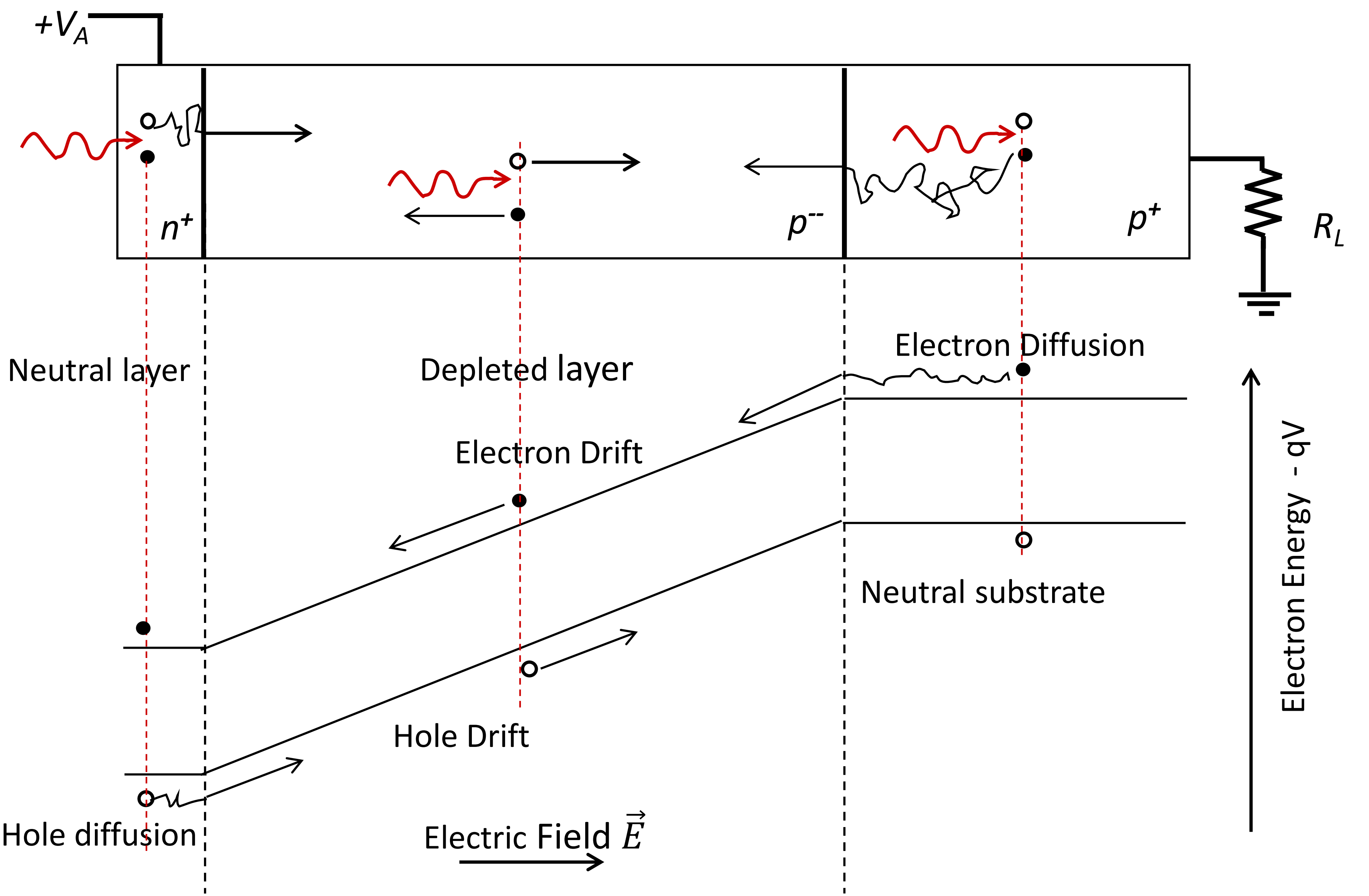
Reverse biased p-n junction: $V_A > 0$



Employed for specific purposes, e.g. microsystems with integrated waveguides for on-chip optical connections

Most widely employed; the active area (illuminated area) can be designed with flexibility and can attain wide size

Carrier motion in PD



Carrier motion and Current in PD

Carriers generated in the depleted layer:

- A carrier in the depleted layer induces opposite charges in the conductive electrodes (neutral semiconductor layer and metal contact to the external circuit)
- The value of the induced charge on a given electrode depends on the carrier distance from the electrode
- If the carrier moves the **charge induced on the electrode varies**, hence current flows through the contact

Conclusion: a carrier drifting in the depleted layer **causes current to flow** through the metal contact to the external circuit

Carriers generated in neutral regions:

- A carrier in a neutral region is surrounded by a huge population of other free carriers
- When the carrier moves the distribution of free carriers swifltly rearranges itself to electrically **screen any effect of the carrier motion** on the external circuit

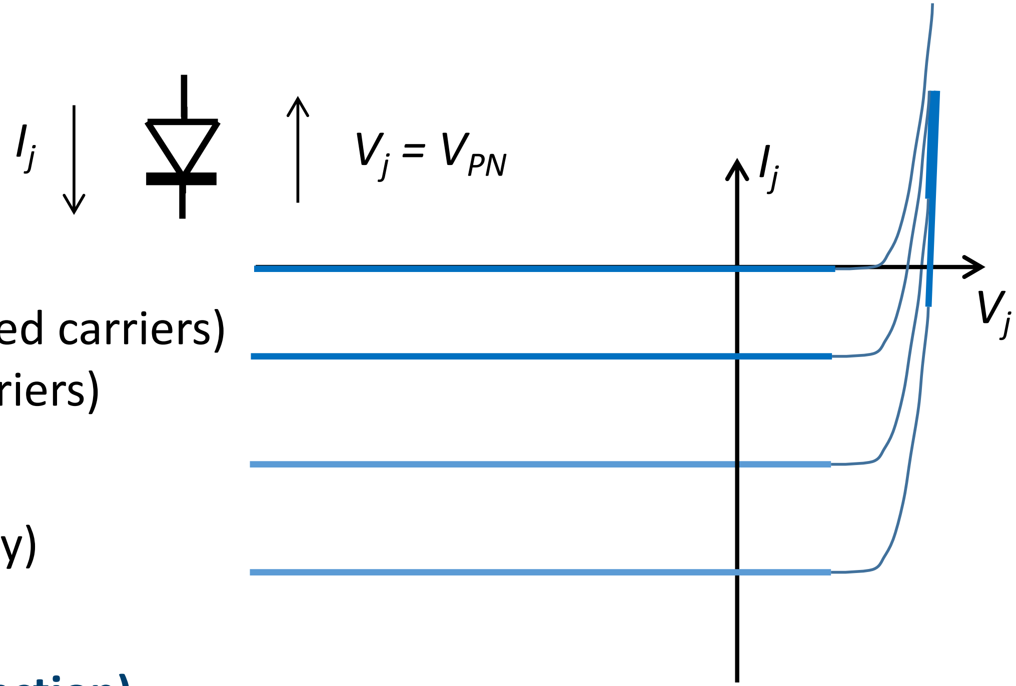
Conclusion: **as long as it diffuses** in a neutral region, a carrier **does NOT cause current** to flow through the metal contact to the external circuit.
However, **if** by diffusion it reaches the edge of depletion layer before recombining, **then** it drifts in the electric field and causes current to flow.

I-V characteristics of PhotoDiodes

I-V characteristics of PD

❑ I-V of illuminated p-n junction

$$I_j = I_0 \exp\frac{qV_j}{kT} - I_0 - I_p$$



I_0 reverse current (thermally generated carriers)

I_p photocurrent (photogenerated carriers)

$$I_p = S_D \cdot P_L$$

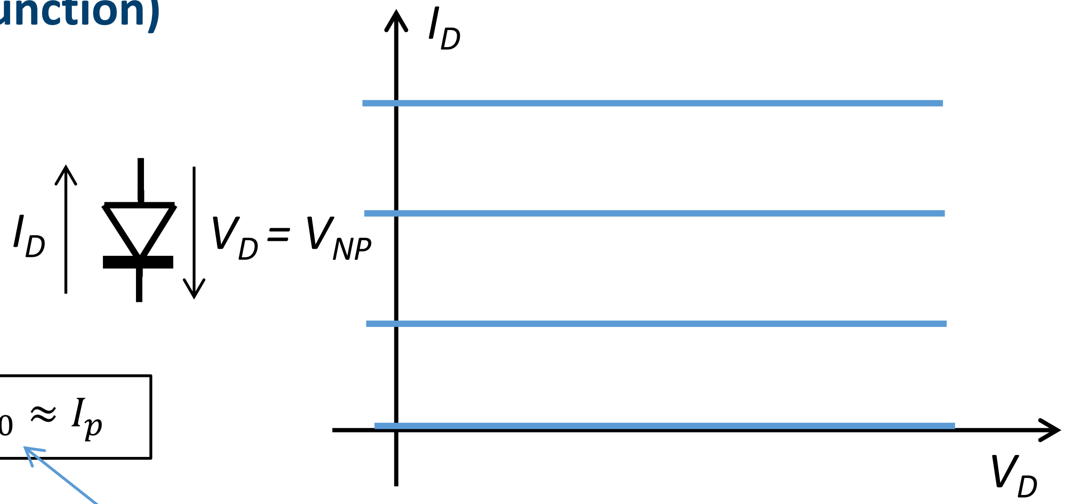
(P_L optical power; S_d radiant sensitivity)

❑ Photodetector (reverse-biased junction)

I_D detector current = - I_j

V_D detector voltage = - V_j

$$I_D = I_p + I_0 - I_0 \exp\left(-\frac{qV_D}{kT}\right)$$



with $V_D \gg kT/q$

$$I_D = I_p + I_0 \approx I_p$$

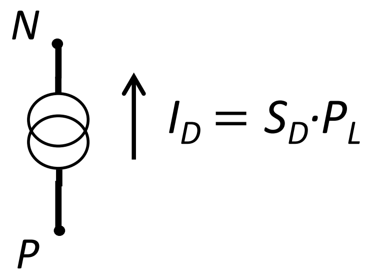
Detector photocurrent $\propto P_L$

Detector dark current

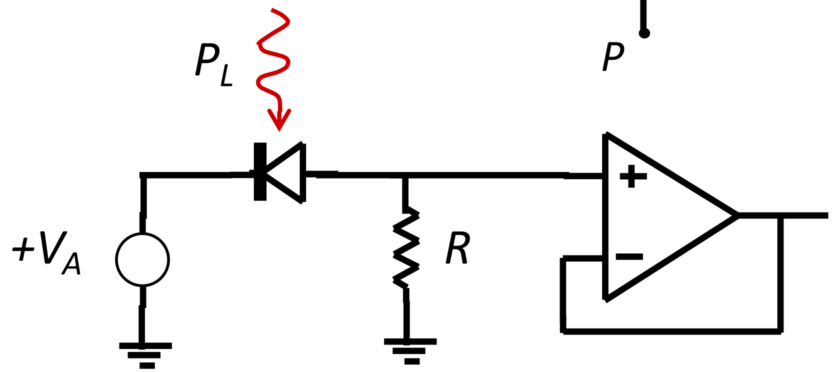
Stationary operation of PD

LINEAR PHOTOCURRENT MODE: PD with high reverse bias $V_A \gg kT/q$

stationary equivalent circuit:
photo-controlled current generator

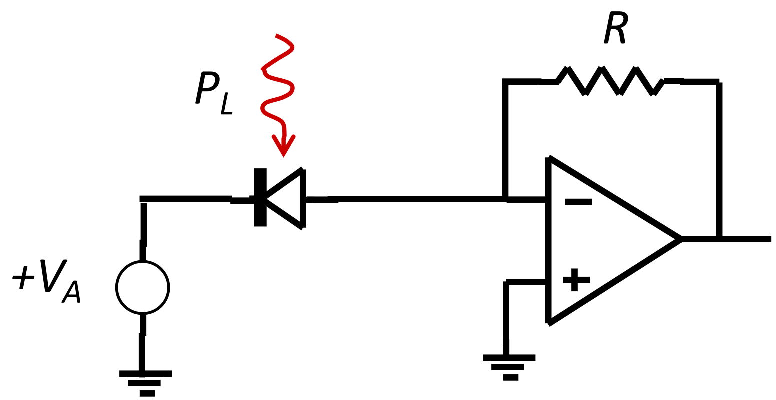


OPERATION WITH PASSIVE LOAD



$$V_O = R \cdot I_D \propto P_L$$

OPERATION WITH ACTIVE LOAD



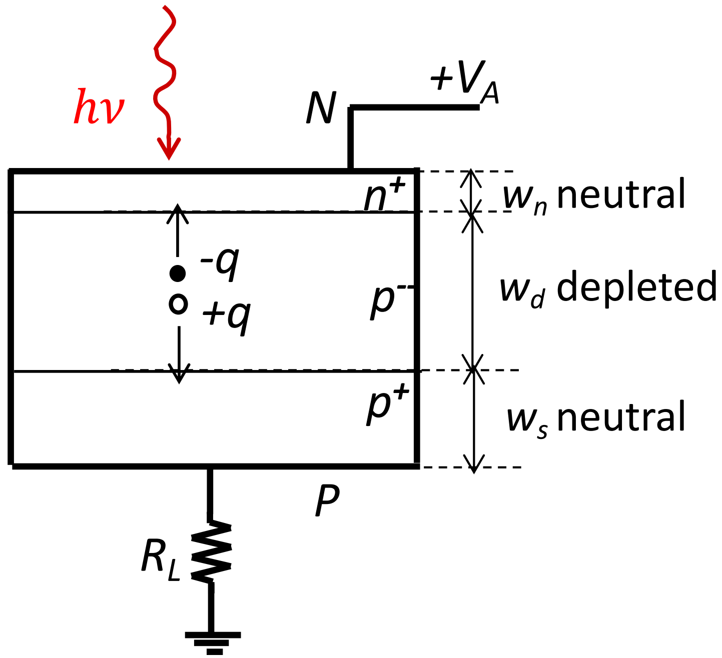
$$V_O = -R \cdot I_D \propto P_L$$

Dark-Current, sensitive area and photon detection efficiency

Photon Detection Efficiency η_D

P_d = probability of a photon to generate a free electron-hole pair **in the depletion layer** = product of probabilities of

1. NOT being reflected at the surface
2. NOT being absorbed in the top neutral layer w_n
3. BEING absorbed in the depletion layer w_d



Denoting by R the reflectivity (probability of reflection) and L_a=$1/\alpha$ optical absorption depth:

$$P_d = (1-R) \cdot e^{-\alpha w_n} \cdot (1 - e^{-\alpha w_d})$$

In most PD structures the probability that carriers photogenerated in neutral regions reach by diffusion the depletion layer is negligible, hence the photon detection efficiency or quantum detection efficiency η_D is simply

$$\eta_D = P_d = (1-R) \cdot e^{-\frac{w_n}{L_a}} \cdot \left(1 - e^{-\frac{w_d}{L_a}}\right)$$

In PD structures where carriers diffusing in neutral regions have significant probability of reaching the depletion region, additional contributions to η_D must be taken into account

Photon Detection Efficiency ηD

$$\eta_D = P_d = (1-R) \cdot e^{-\frac{w_n}{L_a}} \cdot \left(1 - e^{-\frac{w_d}{L_a}}\right)$$

Basic sources of η_D losses are 1) surface reflection, 2) absorption in the neutral input layer and 3) incomplete absorption in the depletion layer (active volume).
The η_D value attained depends on the actual material properties and PD structure and on the light wavelength λ.

η_D loss by Reflection

- The **reflection at vacuum-semiconductor surface is strong** because of the high step discontinuity in refractive index n, since n is high in semiconductors. In Silicon n>3,5 over all the visible range and further rises at short λ; the reflectivity is accordingly high R>30% and further rises at short λ .
- Losses can be reduced by **tapering the n-transition** with deposition of a multi-layer anti-reflection (AR) coating of materials with n values suitably scaled down from semiconductor to vacuum. Strong reduction can be obtained, down to R<<10%.

Photon Detection Efficiency ηD

$$\eta_D = P_d = (1-R) \cdot e^{-\frac{w_n}{L_a}} \cdot \left(1 - e^{-\frac{w_d}{L_a}}\right)$$

η_D loss by absorption in neutral input layer

- At short λ, η_D cutoff occurs because photons are all absorbed in the neutral region at the surface. In actual Si-PD structures w_n ranges from about *100 nm* to 1 *μm;* the cutoff λ congruently ranges from about *300 nm* to *400 nm*.

η_D loss by incomplete absorption in the depletion layer

- At long λ , η_D cutoff occurs because the absorption falls down.
  Silicon is ≈ transparent beyond *1100 nm*, since photon energy < Si energy gap. In actual Si-PD structures the depth w_d can range from one to various tens of *μm*; given the λ-dependance of L_a , the cutoff λ ranges from about *900 nm* to *1100 nm*.

Current Si-PDs provide high efficiency ($\eta_D > 30\%$) in the visible 400nm < λ < 800nm.

The operation range can be extended to longer λ with PDs in other semiconductors:
up to 1500nm with Germanium devices and up to 2000nm with InGaAs devices

Dark Current and Noise

- Even without light falling on it, a finite current I_B flows in a reverse-biased p-n junction. It is called **Dark Current** in PDs and reverse current in ordinary circuit component diodes.
- I_B is due to spontaneous generation of free carriers by thermal effects.
- Just like in Phototubes, the shot noise of I_B is the photodiode internal noise, with effective power density (unilateral)

$$\sqrt{S_B} = \sqrt{2qI_B}$$

- The internal noise of PD devices with **microelectronic-size** (sensitive area <1mm^2) is much lower than the input noise of even the best high-impedance preamplifiers. In the applications of microelectronic PDs the circuit noise is dominant, just like for vacuum phototubes.
- However, semiconductor PDs have **dark current density j_B much higher than vacuum phototubes**; this fact significantly limits the active area size of semiconductor detectors that can be employed for very low-noise operation.

Dark Current of Si-PD

In Silicon device physics and technology it is ascertained that in reverse-biased junctions with moderate electric field intensity:

a) the dark current is mainly due to thermal generation of carriers in the depletion layer. Contribution by diffusion of minority carriers from neighbouring neutral regions are much lower and negligible in comparison.

b) The thermal generation rate in the depletion has volume density n_G given by

$$n_G = \frac{n_i}{2\tau}$$

n_i = intrinsic carrier density; $n_i = 1{,}45 \times 10^{10}\ \mathrm{cm}^{-3}$ @ Room Temperature

τ = minority carrier lifetime, strongly dependent on the device technology i.e on the starting material and on the fabrication process. Typical values:

$\tau \approx \mu s$ **ordinary Si technology** for integrated circuits

$\tau \approx ms$ **ordinary Si technology** for detector devices

$\tau \approx 1 \div 10s$ **best available Si technology** for detector devices

Dark Current and active area of Si-PD

A Si-PD with circular active area of diameter *D* (area $A = \pi D^2/4$) and depletion layer thickness w_d has dark generation rate $n_B = n_G A w$. For setting a limit $n_B < n_{Bmax}$ the diameter *D* must be limited

$$A < A_{max} = \frac{n_{B\max}}{n_G w_d} = \frac{2\tau n_{B\max}}{n_i w_d} \qquad D \leq D_{max} = \sqrt{\frac{8\tau n_{B\max}}{\pi n_i w_d}}$$

Example: Si-PD with w_d =10µ in good Si detector technology ($\tau \approx$10ms), intended to have the widest possible area with noise lower than a preamplifier with $\sqrt{S_i} = \approx 0{,}01 pA/\sqrt{Hz}$. For keeping the shot noise so low, the generation rate must be limited to $n_{B\max} < 10^9 s^{-1}$ which implies

$$D < D_{\max}\text{=1,3cm}$$

As we will see, the area limitation is more severe for avalanche photodiodes (APD). The APD internal gain makes negligible the role of circuit noise, hence it is the APD detector noise that limits the sensitivity and it is worth to reduce it more drastically.

Example: Si-APD with *w =10µm,* fabricated in very good Si detector technology (say *τ≈1s*) intended to have low dark rate, comparable to that of a good vacuum tube photocathode, say $n_{B\max} < 10^3 s^{-1}$ like a S20 photocathode with diameter 3cm. The limit is

$$D < D_{\max} = 130um$$

Current signal in PDs and dynamic response

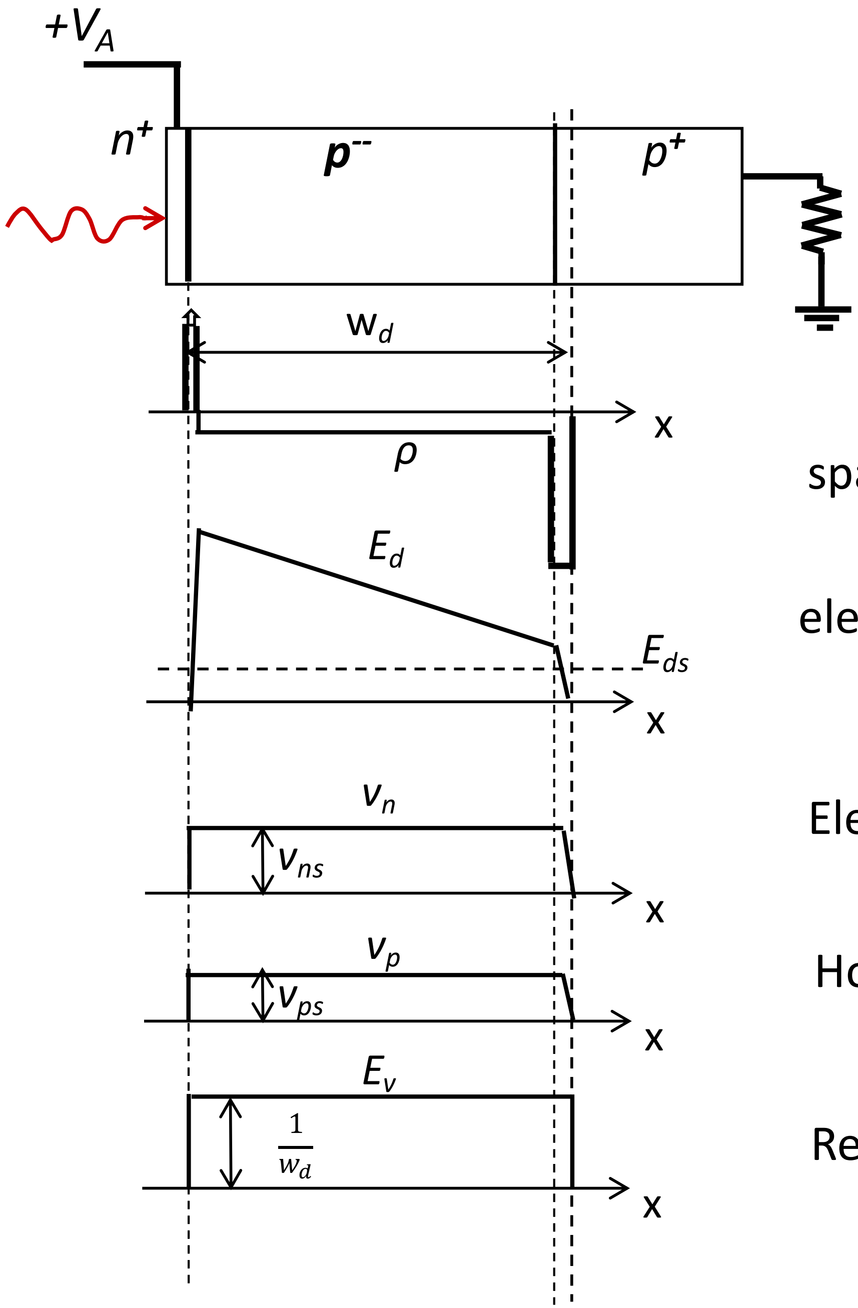
Carrier motion and detector current

- Carriers drifting in depleted regions induce current at PD terminals, whereas carriers diffusing in neutral regions do NOT
- **The Shockley-Ramo (S-R) theorem is still valid in presence of space charge**
- Knowing the actual velocity v_c of a drifting carrier, the current induced at the PD terminals can be computed by the S-R theorem
- **The motion** of carriers in a semiconductor with electric field $\boldsymbol{E_d}$ **is different from that in vacuum with equal** $\boldsymbol{E_d}$: carriers suffer scattering on the lattice and dissipate in the collisions most of the energy received from the field.
  No more the acceleration, but the drift velocity v_c is a function of the field E_d .
- In Silicon (and other materials) the motion of electrons is different from holes:
  - at **low field** $\boldsymbol{E_d < 2\ kV/cm}$ $= 0{,}2\ V/\mu m$ the regime is **Ohmic**: $v_c = \mu_c E_d$
    (electron mobility $\mu_n \approx 1500\ cm^2V^{-1}s^{-1}$; holes $\mu_p \approx 450\ cm^2V^{-1}s^{-1}$)
  - as E_d increases above $2kV/cm$ the velocity rises progressively slower
  - at $\boldsymbol{E_{ds} \approx 20kV/cm}$ $= 2V/\mu m$ the **velocity saturates** at the scattering-limited values

  for electrons $\boxed{v_{ns} \approx 10^7\ cm/s}$ for holes $\boxed{v_{ps} \approx 8 \cdot 10^6\ cm/s}$

  which are almost equal to the thermal scattering velocity $v_{th} \approx 10^7\ cm/s$

Carrier motion in PD



cross-section of typical PD structure

space charge density ρ in the depleted region

electric field E_d > saturation E_{ds} over almost all w_d

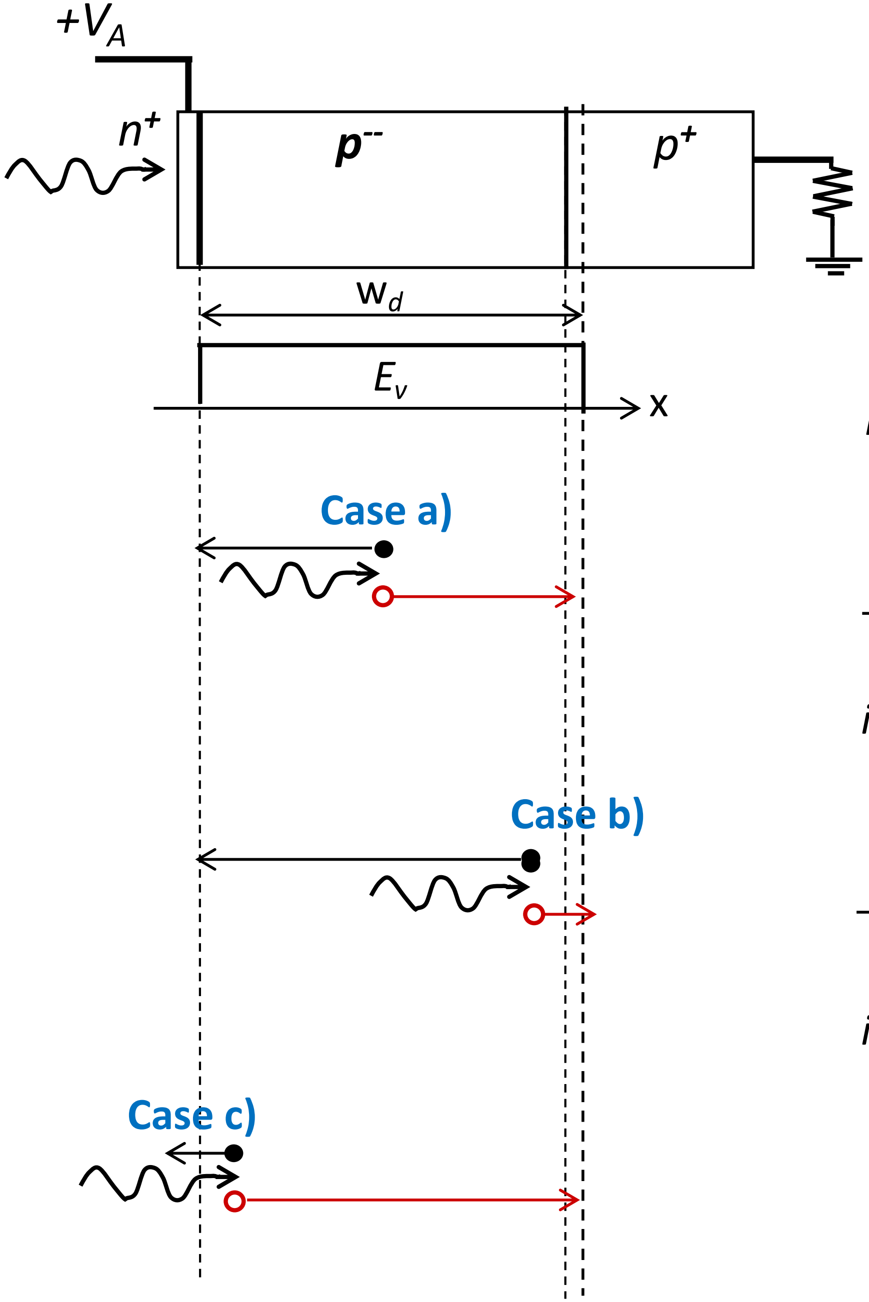
Electron drift velocity $v_n \approx v_{ns}$ over almost all w_d

Hole drift velocity $v_p \approx v_{ps}$ over almost all w_d

Reference Field E_v for S-R theorem

$$E_v = \frac{1}{w_d}$$

Single carrier motion and current

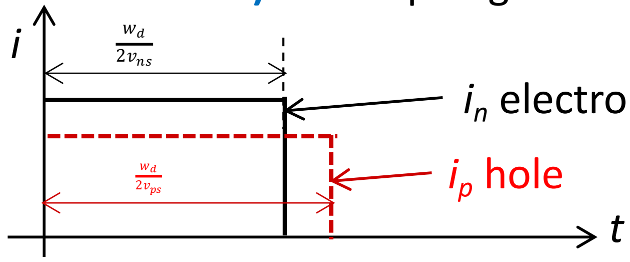


Current of a single-carrier

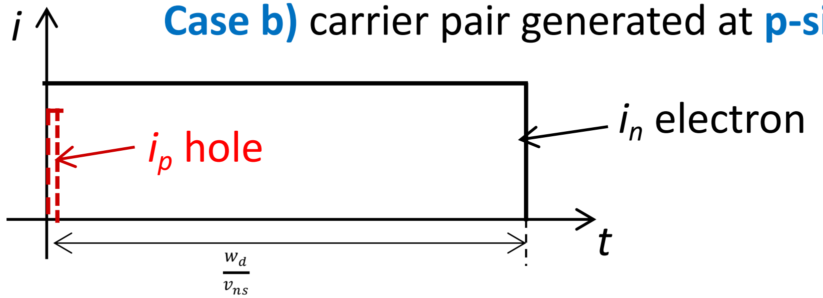
$$i_c = q_c v_c E_v$$

S-R theorem:
E_v reference field
q_c and v_c carrier charge and velocity

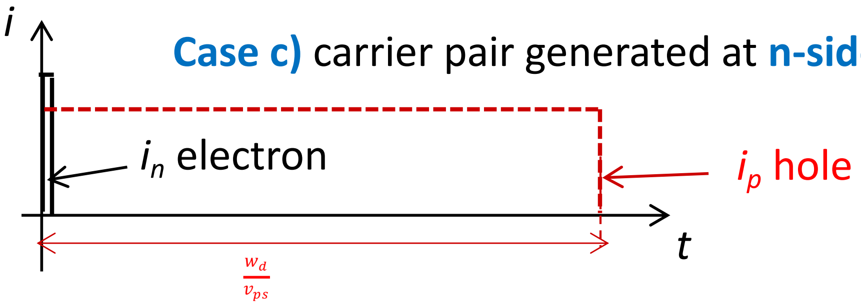
Case a) carrier pair generated at **mid-way**



Case b) carrier pair generated at **p-side**



Case c) carrier pair generated at **n-side**



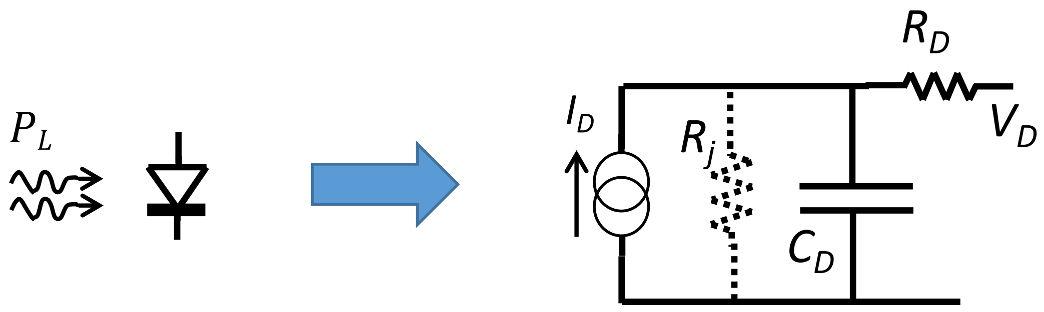
Single carrier motion and current

- The duration of a single-carrier pulse is given by the **transit time T_t** of the carrier in the depleted region. At saturated velocity it is quite short: in Silicon the carrier travel takes ≈**10ps/µm**, that is, with w_d = 1 ÷ 100µm it is T_t = 10ps ÷ 1ns.
- The single-carrier pulse duration thus depends on the position of carrier generation. Rigorously, the waveform of the current due to a fast multi-photon pulse is not the convolution of the optical pulse with a standard carrier response: it is a **more complex computation** that depends on the spatial distribution of absorbed photons.
- However, convolution with a suitable standard single-carrier response gives the waveform with approximation adequate for most cases, at least for times longer than the carrier transit time.
- **A simplifying and conservative approximation currently employed for Silicon PDs assumes as standard the response to an electron that crosses all the depletion layer.**

> Finite width of response implies low-pass filtering in light-to-current transduction: it's a mobile-mean over time $T_t = w_d/v_{sn}$, with upper band-limit $1/2T_t = v_{sn}/2w_d$.

Note the w_d trade-off: long w_d is required for high quantum efficiency at long wavelength λ, short w_d for ultrafast time response.

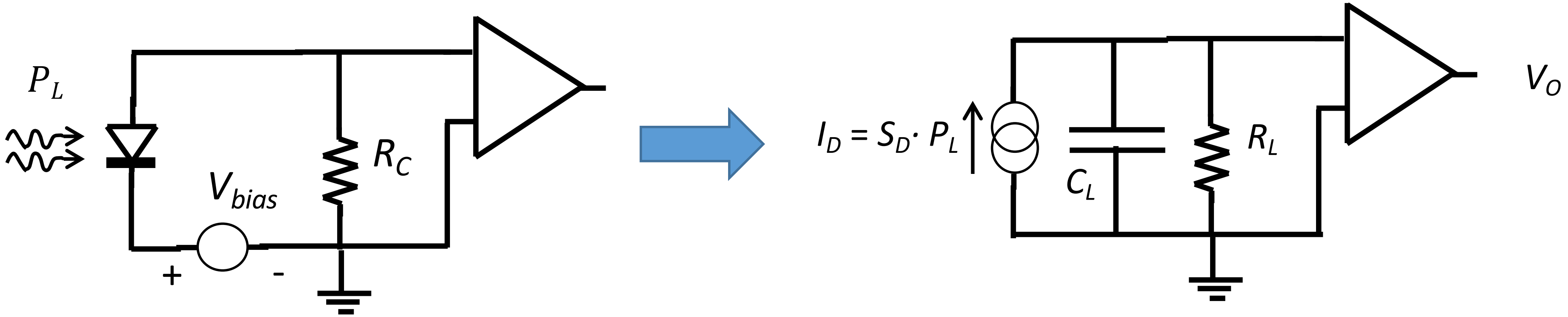
Photodiode Equivalent Circuit



- $I_D = S_D \cdot P_L$ photo-controlled generator (S_D radiant sensitivity or responsivity)
- C_D diode capacitance (p-n junction)
- R_D diode **series** resistance (of the input layer and substrate)
- R_j parallel resistance of the reverse biased junction is considered → ∞

REAL CIRCUIT

EQUIVALENT CIRCUIT



R_C circuit input resistance

R_L total Resistance Load ≈ $R_C + R_D$

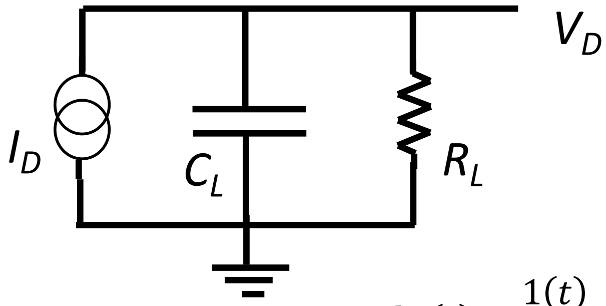
C_L total Capacitive Load = $C_D + C_S$ (stray) + C_A (amplifier)

the load circuit is a low-pass filter with time constant $R_L C_L$
in the transfer from detector current I_D to output voltage V_O

Photodiode Dynamic Response

In summary, the PD dynamic response is limited:

1. By the light-to-current transduction, with pulse response $h_D(t)$ of finite-width T_t , well approximated by a rectangular pulse.
2. By the load circuit, with δ-response $h_L(t)$ of finite-width $T_L \approx R_L C_L$



$$h_L(t) = \frac{1(t)}{C_L} \exp\left(-\frac{t}{R_L C_L}\right)$$

The δ-response $h_P(t)$ in the transfer from light power to detector voltage results from the convolution of the two

$$h_P(t) = h_D(t) * h_L(t)$$

Hence the width T_P is the quadratic addition of the two

$$T_P = \sqrt{T_t^{\,2} + T_L^{\,2}} = \sqrt{T_t^{\,2} + R_L^{\,2} C_L^{\,2}}$$

For exploiting well the fast response $h_D(t)$ of the PD current, the load circuit does not need to have much faster response, but just comparable or slightly better

$$T_L = R_L C_L \leq T_t$$

Photodiode Dynamic Response

For a PD in planar Silicon with depletion layer w_d and circular area A of diameter D

$$C_D = \varepsilon_{Si} \frac{A}{w_d} \qquad\qquad T_t = \frac{w_d}{v_{sn}} \approx w_d \cdot 10 \frac{ps}{\mu m}$$

Assuming (quite optimistically) that the load capacitance be given only the junction $C_L \approx C_D$ and applying the condition $R_L C_L \leq T_t$ we get

$$A \leq \frac{{w_d}^2}{v_{sn}} \frac{1}{R_L \varepsilon_{Si}} \qquad \text{that is} \qquad D \leq w_d \sqrt{\frac{1}{\pi v_{sn} R_L \varepsilon_{Si}}}$$

In wide-band operation the load resistance R_L is small, but is not much less than 100 Ω (diode resistance ≈ some ten Ohm and characterisic resistance of wide-band circuits 50÷75Ω). For exploiting well the fast response limited by the transit time, with R_L = 100 Ω, ε_{Si}≈1,06pf/cm, $v_{ns} \approx 10^7$ cm/s , the limit to the size of sensitive area is

$$D \leq 12{,}5 \cdot w_d$$

In the design of detector devices, the selected depletion layer depth w_d depends on the wavelength of interest and on the photon detection efficiency sought; it actually ranges from 1µm to about 100µm.

The area of fast semiconductor photodiodes thus is small in all cases: as w_d ranges from 1µm to 50µm the limit diameter correspondingly ranges from 25µm to 1,25mm