

Application Note

1. Introduction

This application note aims at providing you with some recommendations to achieve improved performance.

The initial assumptions are the following:

- Proper grounding and routing of all signals is essential to ensure accurate signal conversion
- Eliminate the loop area return by using both separate ground plane and power plane
- Circuitry placement on mixed-signal PCBs is a crucial design point

In many cases, engineers have preconceived notions about mixed-signal designs and how analog and digital placement, partitioning and associated design should be performed.

When laying out components for a mixed-signal PCB, certain considerations are critical to achieve optimum performance. Mixed-signal is particularly tricky to design since analog devices possess different characteristics compared to digital components: different power rating, current, voltage and heat dissipation requirements, to name a few.

This study shows how to prevent digital logic ground currents from contaminating analog circuitry on a mixed-signal PCB and particularly ADC component.

In our attempt to answer this question, let's keep in mind two basic principles of electromagnetic compatibility. One is that currents should be returned to their source as locally and compactly as possible, through the smallest possible loop area. The second is that a system should have only one reference plane, if not we would create a dipole antenna.

2. Ground Plane Rules and Layout

2.1 Current Loop Area and Ground Plane

The most interesting aspect to board level designers, is the common return currents of individual components. Any signal running on a PCB trace creates a return current, which flows through the ground connection. This return current follows the route of minimum impedance; it would prefer to run directly under the signal trace.

Figure 2-1. Signal Traces Crossing Over a Slit in the Ground Plane

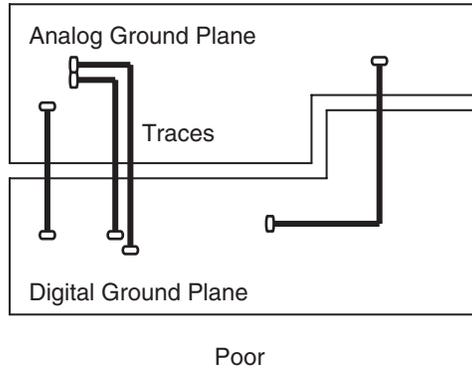
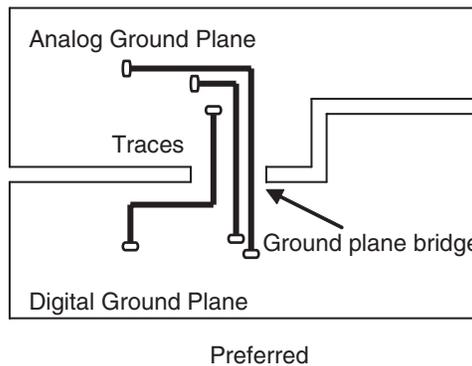


Figure 2-2. Analog and Digital Ground Planes Connected Together at a Single Location.



If you were to slit the ground plane and run traces across the slit as shown in [Figure 2-1](#), there would be no return path near the trace and the current would have to flow through a large loop. High-frequency currents flowing in large loops produce radiation and high ground inductance. Low-level analog currents flowing in large loops are susceptible to interference.

The key to determining the optimum mixed-signal board layout is to understand how and where the ground return currents actually flow.

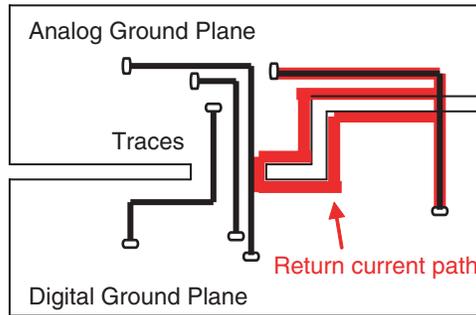
If you need to split the ground plane and run traces across the split, you should first connect the planes together at one location, thus forming a bridge, as shown in [Figure 2-2](#).

Then, by routing all the traces so that they cross at this bridge, you will provide a current return path directly underneath each of the traces, thereby producing a very small loop area. Hence the digital ground currents do not flow in the analog section of the ground plane.

Design Considerations for Mixed-Signal

Nevertheless, if the outgoing and return current paths are forced to diverge from each other, the path impedance will increase. Furthermore, forcing the outgoing and return current paths apart creates a large loop area enclosed by the current loop. This large loop area can be defined as an antenna, which can radiate and/or pick up energy. If the loop area is within a critical size for the frequency of any energy in the loop, a significant amount of energy may be radiated from this virtual antenna, creating RF problems.

Figure 2-3. When Currents Diverge, a Loop Area is Created



In practice, the current returns must consist of large area ground planes for low impedance to high frequency currents. Without a low-impedance ground plane, it is therefore almost impossible to avoid parasitic resistance and inductance, especially at high frequencies.

Each PCB in the system should have at least one complete layer dedicated to the ground plane. Ideally, a double-sided board should have one side completely dedicated to ground and the other side for interconnections. In practice, it is not always possible, since some of the ground plane will certainly have to be removed to allow for signal and power crossovers, vias, and through-holes. Nevertheless, as much area as possible should be preserved, and at least 75% should remain.

2.2 How to Stack-up Properly?

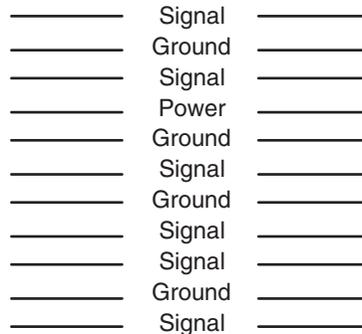
As each PCBs generate EMI, we should take some precautions such as minimizing crosstalk, proper grounding and namely proper layer stack-up which will significantly reduce ElectroMagnetic Interference (EMI) problems.

An ideal stack-up will be a ground plane under each other plane (signal or power). In this case, a signal should not be disrupted by a return current of an another signal.

If it is not possible for cost reasons, place each signal layer in between the ground plane and power (or ground) plane. Inductance is directly proportional to the distance an electric charge has to cover from the source of an electric charge to the ground. As the distance gets shorter, the inductance becomes smaller.

Therefore, placing the ground planes close to a signal source reduces inductance and helps contain EMI.

Figure 2-4. Eleven-layer Stack-up



This is an example of an eleven-layer stack-up PCB. In the stack-up, the stripline signal layers are the quietest because they are centered by power and GND planes. A solid ground plane next to the power plane creates a set of low Equivalent Series Resistances (ESR) capacitors.

With integrated circuit edge rates becoming faster and faster, these techniques help to contain EMI.

Note: This solution could be used if the signals are differentials.

For reducing the number of layers, you could use this configuration: “Ground - Signal - Signal - Ground” instead of “Ground - Signal - Ground - Signal – Ground” (one layer less).

When two signal layers are side by side, you must route the signals of layer N orthogonal to signals of layer N+1 to minimize crosstalk and parasitic capacitor.

Component selection and proper placement on the board is important to controlling EMI, so be careful about these points:

- Select low-inductance components, such as surface mount capacitors and effective series inductance
- Use solid ground planes next to power planes

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2.3 Power Plane (Analog and Digital)

For performance reasons it is always recommended to use separate supplies for digital and analog circuitry.

The digital supply should only be used for parts placed over the digital ground plane, (i.e. all pure digital parts). The analog supply is used for all analog and mixed-signal parts.

It is important that a digital power plane does not overlap an analog power plane as shown on [Figure 2-5: Poor](#). This will produce capacitance between the overlapping areas, which is likely to cause RF emissions to pass from one plane to another.

Figure 2-5. Overlapping Analog and Digital Planes



Power planes are designed using the same rules as ground planes. Keep the analog supply plane entirely under the analog ground plane, see on [Figure 2-5: Preferred](#). This gives an analog supply plane over the analog ground plane and a digital supply plane over the digital ground plane. In this case, it could not cause unwanted capacitance between the two planes.

Moreover, power supply pins should be decoupled directly to the ground plane. The ceramic capacitor should be located as close as possible to the IC power pins.

Separate power supplies for analog and digital circuits are also highly desirable, even if the voltages are the same. The analog supply should be used to power the converter. If the converter has a pin designated as a digital supply pin, it should be powered from a separate analog supply. All converter power pins should be decoupled to the analog ground plane, and all logic circuit power pins should be decoupled to the digital ground plane.

The sampling clock generation circuitry should be treated like analog circuitry and also be grounded and heavily-decoupled to the analog ground plane. It also should be isolated from noisy digital circuits.

Therefore, the ground plane not only acts as a low impedance return path for decoupling high frequency currents but also minimizes RF emissions. Because of the shielding action of the ground plane, the circuits' susceptibility to external RF is also reduced.

3. Board Partitioning

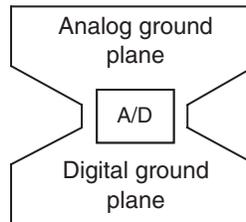
As we can see in [Section 2.1 "Current Loop Area and Ground Plane" on page 2](#), the digital ground currents must not flow in the analog section of the ground plane, so a special organization is needed for the placement of the components.

Correct component placement is of utmost importance. This is the determining factor in ensuring how well analog circuitry signals flow through the PCB, as well as how the planes are split to keep analog characteristics separate from the digital section.

For the highest system performance, it is important to arrange the different blocks in a way that interaction between the potentially noisy circuit blocks and sensitive analog circuits is minimized. For example, short trace lengths reduce the amount of distributed capacitance and mutual inductance between signal routes.

If the system contains only one A/D converter, you could split the ground plane and connect the analog and digital sections together at one place, under the A/D converter and remember that no traces can be routed across the split in the plane. (be careful with discipline routing).

Figure 3-1. An acceptable Layout of Mixed-signal Board with a Single A/D Converter and a Split Ground Plane

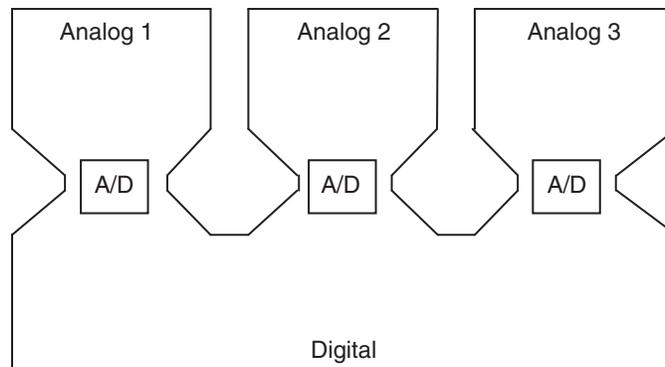


The system star ground occurs where the analog and digital ground planes are joined together at the mixed signal device. While this approach will generally work in a simple system with a single PCB and a single ADC/DAC, it is not optimum for multicard mixed-signal systems.

Moreover, ground planes should be spaced as far apart as possible from each other to avoid coupling issues.

This is an example with a system which contains three devices.

Figure 3-2. Separate Analog and Digital Ground Plane Regions



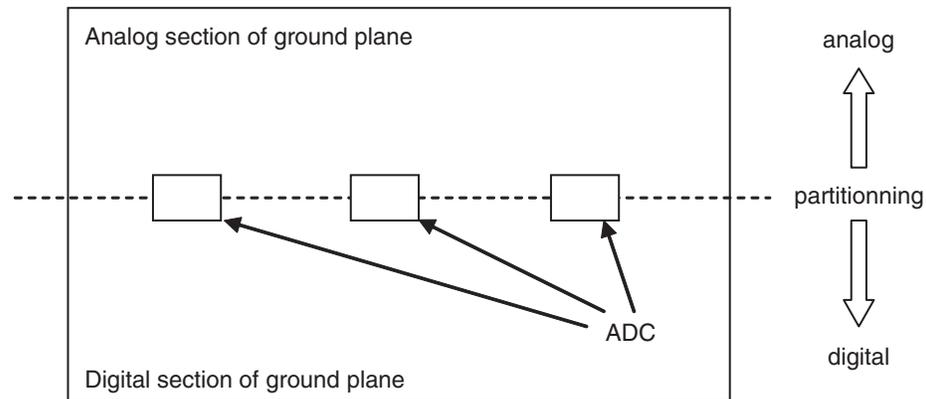
Design Considerations for Mixed-Signal

Figure 3-2 shows the best placement method, using an analog-to-digital converter (ADC). One side of the A/D has analog pins resting directly on top of the analog plane, while the other side's digital pins are squarely on the digital plane.

In this case, the planes are connected together and traces could run across the bridge. If the system contains several A/D, you could reproduce this type of scheme.

The scheme shown in Figure 3-3 is good when the ADCs are independent (no connections between analog 1, analog 2, analog 3). In the case where there are connections between them, the following scheme is more adapted.

Figure 3-3. A Partitioned Mixed-signal Board with Multiple A/D Converters and a Single Ground Plane



In fact, if there are connections between them and they are placed like the scheme in Figure 3-3, the connections will go from analog 1 to analog 2 by the digital section although we have seen before that is a rule which could not be broken.

Do not split the ground plane, use one solid ground plane under both analog and digital sections of the board.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that it is essential to respect the following design rules:

- Do not split the ground plane, use one solid plane under both analog and digital sections of the board
- Use large area ground planes for low impedance current return paths
- Keep over 75% board area for the ground plane
- Separate analog and digital power planes
- Use solid ground planes next to power planes
- Locate all analogue components and lines over the analogue power plane and all digital components and lines over the digital power plane
- Do not route traces over the split in the power planes, unless if traces that must go over the power plane split must be on layers adjacent to the solid ground plane
- Think about where and how the ground return currents are actually flowing
- Partition your PCB with separate analog and digital sections
- Place components properly

If these simple rules are followed, the design should avoid some important mistakes. To conclude, component placement and partitioning, combined with routing discipline, are the keys to success in layout a mixed-signal PCB – not the isolation of the ground planes.



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