HEWLETT PACKARD
COMPONENTS

APPLICATION NOTE 948

Performance of the 6N135, 6N136 and 6N137 Optocouplers in Short To Moderate Length Digital Data Transmission Systems

This application note assists system designers by describing the performance to be expected from the use of HP 6N135-6N137 optocouplers as a line receiver in a TTL-TTL compatible NRZ[1] data transmission link. It describes several useful total systems including line driver, cable, terminations and TTL compatible connections. The systems described utilize inexpensive cable and operate satisfactorily over the range of transmission distances from 1 ft. to 300 ft. Over this range of distances, the data rate varies from 0.6 megabits per second to 19 megabits per second largely limited by coupler performance at short distances, and cable losses at longer distances.

[1] Non-return to zero

INTRODUCTION

Optocouplers can function as excellent alternatives to integrated circuit line receivers in digital data transmission applications. Their major advantages consist of superior common-mode noise rejection and true ground isolation between the two subsystems. For example, a conventional line receiver is limited to a ±20V common-mode noise rejection at best from DC over its operating frequency range, while an optocoupler can achieve rejections of ±2.5kV at 60Hz.

A conventional optocoupler that utilizes a photo-transistor is limited in its minimum total switching time. At the higher data rates, above 200-500 kbits/s, these delay times can become very significant. The HP 6N135 and 6N136 utilize an integrated photo-diode and transistor to produce lower total switching time. The HP 6N137 adds an integrated amplifier within its package to decrease these delay times still further. All three units can produce data rates well in excess of 500 kbits/s, while the 6N137 can couple an isolated 9.5MHz (19M bits/s) clock from its input to its output. These data rates are achieved with common-mode noise voltage rejection in excess of that provided by most types of line receivers at all frequencies.

The information contained in this application note covers the performance of optocoupler line receiver circuits; however, it does not describe design details. These details are covered in Application Note 947 "Digital Data Transmission Using Optically Coupled Isolators".

This application note describes the basic design elements of a data transmission link and presents several examples of total systems that will be useful to systems designers at distances that range from 1 ft. to 300 ft. and have a moderate overall cost. First, a few measures of performance are defined to allow systems to be compared with one another. Second, the elements of an optocoupler data transmission system are discussed. Third, circuit examples and demonstrated performance of a selected set of systems are presented for the various transmission distances. This presentation includes schematics, representative waveforms at intermediate circuit points, and a summary performance table. It compares the results of passive (resistive) terminations with active terminations that improve overall performance at the longer transmission distances. Fourth, the trade-offs that were made to arrive at the selected system components are described. Along with the trade-offs, there is a discussion of approaches to increase performance by selection of other circuit components or by "peaking" a given length system.

DEFINITIONS OF PERFORMANCE

In data transmission systems that utilize optocouplers, there are no standardized definitions that allow performance capability to be specified. The major performance parameters that are of interest are data rate capability, usually specified in bits per second; and immunity to common mode noise at the coupler input, usually specified as AC or DC common mode voltage rejection in volts, or transient voltage noise rejection in volts/microsecond.

To arrive at a definition of maximum data rate capability requires that the total system be specified including all components, and in addition, data modulation and demodulation techniques. In order to compare the various systems presented in the application note, it is necessary to define some useful terms.

One commonly used modulation technique for digital data data transmission is NRZ, or non-return-to-zero transmission. In the most common form of this technique, a twisted pair transmission line is driven by a balanced driver with an alternating plus or minus voltage signal. A number of integrated circuits are available to provide the drive signals and create a straightforward design.

One potential measure of system performance for NRZ, and potentially other modulation techniques as well, is the measurement of the maximum 50% duty cycle clock frequency that the system will pass. Since a clock represents a total 1/0 and 0/1 transition each full cycle, this square wave provides two bits of data for each cycle. As the upper clock frequency limit of a system using couplers is reached, the duty cycle will change from 50%. The MAXIMUM CLOCK DATA RATE is found by observing the system output as a function of a square wave input until the output distorts to a 10% duty cycle and multiplying this frequency by two (two bits/cycle). At this input frequency, the system data rate is very close to its absolute maximum and any potential recovery of a signal at a higher data rate is impractical. A more detailed definition of this term appears in the glossary.

Another parameter indicative of the performance of a system is to measure the system transient response in its worst case condition. The step response of a transmission system using isolators is a function of the duty cycle and repetition rate. For NRZ, if this term is properly defined, it can indicate a worst case maximum data rate that the system will faithfully transmit, regardless of the combination of ones and zeroes in the data bit stream. This step response term will be referred to as the STEP TRANSIENT DATA RATE MAXIMUM. It assumes that the pulse propagation delay down the transmission line is essentially constant, and defines a data rate maximum at which a single bit of data in a stream of all zeroes and a one, or all ones and a zero may be successfully sent through the system. This is simulated by placing a very low frequency square wave input into the line. Then the circuit delay time from a pulse received at the *end* of the line until the system output makes a transition is measured. This delay time is a function of the cable output risetime and the delays experienced in the coupler and its associated circuitry. The specific delay times are called t_{PHL} and t_{PLH}, indicating delay times for a 1/0 and 0/1 transition respectively. The STEP TRANSIENT DATA RATE MAXIMUM is defined as the inverse of t_{PLH} or t_{PHL}, whichever is longer. In general, this data rate will be lower than the MAXIMUM CLOCK DATA RATE. A more exact definition of t_{PHL}, t_{PLH} and STEP TRANSIENT DATA RATE appears in the glossary.

The parameters used to define worst-case common mode noise immunity are measured for the coupler and associated circuitry without the transmission cable. The common mode voltage rejection is a function of frequency and indicates the maximum AC steady state signal voltage common to both inputs and output ground that will not create an error in the output. This rejection reaches a minimum at some frequency. The transient voltage noise immunity is a measure of the maximum rate of rise (or fall) that can be placed across the common input terminals and output ground without producing an error voltage in the output. This term is a function of the input pulse magnitude and rate of rise for an optocoupler and is stated as a dv/dt minimum in volts per microsecond. Further definitions of these terms appear in the glossary. It should be noted that common mode characteristics of such systems are largely determined by the point at which the noise enters the transmission system. Common mode rejection for a total system would be expected to improve with increasing distance between the common mode insertion point and the input to optocoupler.

ELEMENTS OF AN OPTOCOUPLER DATA TRANSMISSION SYSTEM

The basic elements of an optocoupler transmission system are:

- ☐ Line Driver
- ☐ Transmission Cable
- ☐ Line Termination Circuit
- ☐ Optocoupler
- ☐ TTL Interface Circuit

In order that the performance of systems using the 6N135-6N137 optocouplers might be demonstrated, component elements had to be defined for several systems. These elements are chosen to be TTL compatible at the input and the output. They are also chosen to produce high performance, be moderate in cost, and work over a range of distances of one foot to 300 feet. This can then maximize the utility to systems designers of the circuits demonstrated, thus allowing them to be used without change in a variety of specific applications to produce a known level of performance.

CIRCUIT EXAMPLES AND DEMONSTRATED PERFORMANCE

To reduce the number of complete systems upon which performance is demonstrated to a practical number, a basic representative set of elements must be selected or designed. This includes a single line driver and cable type with performance measurements taken at three transmission distances — 1 ft., 100 ft., and 300 ft. It also includes two termination types, active and passive, and three types of couplers with companion TTL interface circuits. This produces six total data transmission systems upon which data rate performance can be observed at the three transmission distances. Figure 1 illustrates the line driver and cable combination selected. Figure 2 illustrates the pulse response of this driver/cable combination. Figures 3 through 8 indicate the line termination, coupler, and TTL interface circuitry for the various terminations. Included are representative waveforms measured on the three passive termination systems at the 300 ft. transmission distance. Table 1 outlines the critical parameters of the cable used and Tables 2, 3, and 4 summarize the performance demonstrated on all of the transmission systems.

The performance tabulated for the 1 ft. transmission length is indicative of that which might be achieved by a system with negligible performance degradation in the cable. The performance at 100 ft. and 300 ft. indicates the decrease in data rate due to cable losses as the transmission distance increases. This decrease is the most critical data rate limitation and is indicative of the change in performance of systems using low cost cable. Clearly evident in the tables is the increase in performance of the active termination at the 300 ft. transmission distance. Note also that the data rate of the system utilizing the 6N137 at short transmission distances is less with the active than with the passive termination. This decrease is due to the additional delay added by the active termination.

These performance tables can be used to select a design suitable for an application required by a system designer. For example, assume it is desired to design a data transmission system of variable lengths up to 100 ft. and data rates of up to 1.6 Mbits/s. The circuit shown in Figure 4 and the line driver and cable shown in Figure 1 could be selected to assure this level of performance.

SELECTION OF DEMONSTRATION CIRCUIT ELEMENTS

The foregoing systems exemplify achievable performance and incorporate a number of design decisions which are discussed in this section.

LINE DRIVER

Line Drivers generate the signal that is sent down the transmission line. They have limits as to voltage swing, output impedance, and switching time. A good compromise is provided by National Semiconductor's DM 8830. Any similar device with a low output impedance such as the Fairchild 9614 would operate satisfactorily. These devices are TTL input compatible, require no external components, are relatively inexpensive and readily available. They provide adequate performance and produce directly a dual rail (inverting and non-inverting) output.

For systems requiring higher data rates, more sophisticated and expensive drivers can be selected or designed. Figure 9 illustrates a circuit that has a higher current output and produces a higher data rate than an integrated driver. It uses several components, but does not require a supply voltage above the standard TTL 5 volts. To obtain still higher data rates, the driver line voltage output must be increased. This in turn requires a supply voltage above 5 volts. The National Semiconductor LH 0002C is an example of an integrated circuit that can be used to produce directly a higher line voltage. Numerous other discrete circuits could be designed.

TRANSMISSION CABLE

Transmission cables are very critical in the overall system. They can decrease the effect of extraneous noise voltages on system performance by providing shielding. They also greatly affect the signal losses as the transmission length increases. By controlling these losses, cables can permit a single set of system elements to function adequately for both long and short transmission distances. The critical performance parameters of a transmission cable include cost, transmission length, line series resistance (DC losses), high frequency losses, type and amount of shielding and characteristic impedance.

The Belden type 8777 is representative of a relatively well-shielded, inexpensive cable with typical transmission loss. The important characteristics of this cable are summarized in Table 1.

If it is desired to attain higher performance, the line cost becomes considerably more expensive and tends to dominate system costs. These higher performance cables utilize a large conductor size to lower DC losses, and provide considerably lower losses at high frequencies. Examples of such a cable would be Belden 9269 (IBM 32392), Belden 9250 or their equivalents.

The pulse response of the DM 8830 and the Belden 8777 illustrates the waveform degradation of signals sent down this driver/transmission line pair, regardless of the line receiver employed. Figure 1 illustrates this circuit combination, and Figure 2 illustrates the pulse waveform degradation at 1 ft., 100 ft., and 300 ft. into a 68Ω equivalent load.

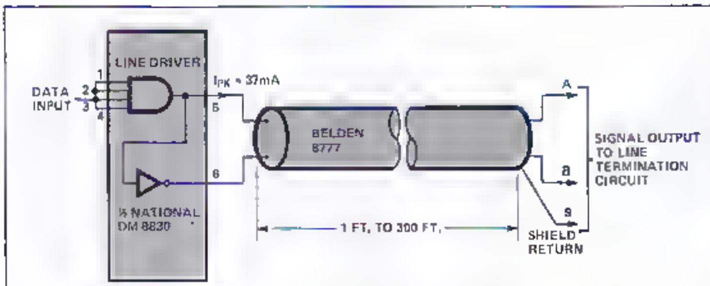


Figure 1. Line Driver and Cable Combination Selected for Use on All Six Systems to Indicate Their Performance.

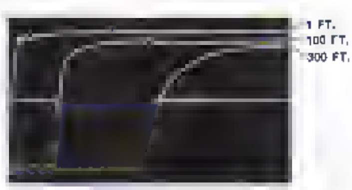


Figure 2. Pulse Characteristics of the Selected Line Driver and Cable. Measurement Observed with a 68Ω Equivalent Termination at One, 100, and 300' Distances. All Waveforms are Line to Line Voltage, Time Referenced to zero feet. Note Time Delay and Waveform Degradation.

LINE TERMINATION CIRCUIT

The line termination circuit converts the voltage arriving at the end of the line to a current impulse to drive the coupler emitter diode. In these system examples, performance of both passive and active circuits was measured.

A passive circuit consists of a set of resistors to match the line to its characteristic impedance and to convert the line voltage to a current. The circuits illustrated here were designed to provide good performance at 300 ft., while not exceeding the coupler input drive current maximum at the 1 ft. line length condition. With this design criterion, these circuits are useful over this *range* of transmission cable lengths. These design characteristics required that two resistive line termination circuits be designed for the three isolators. They are illustrated in Figures 3, 4, and 5.

An improvement in the performance of a resistive termination can be obtained by peaking the line to operate at a specific length as shown in Figure 10. This technique allows the coupler to operate from the peak to peak voltage at the end of the line. To avoid overdriving the coupler, the peaking capacitor value must be minimized. It is chosen by observing the circuit delay time t_{PLH} and selecting the smallest value of capacitor that significantly decreases this delay. With this technique, performance can be expected to improve by as much as 20-30% or more, but the values of peaking capacitor tend to vary with many of the characteristics of components in all of the elements of the system. These include driver output voltage, line length, line losses, coupler delay, etc. This in turn requires each individual system to have a selected value of peaking capacitor.

An active termination utilizes a transistor to act as a line voltage to coupler input current regulator. This technique ignores any attempt to match the line, but instead converts any incoming voltage to a suitable current, once the circuit threshold voltage is exceeded. This tends to decrease circuit sensitivity to line length and other line voltage variations. The delay of an active circuit can limit the maximum system data rate, especially for short transmission distances. But, in general, their use can improve the maximum data rate at the longer distances. In the system examples, two active termination circuits were designed and are illustrated in Figures 6, 7 and 8.

Improving the performance of the active circuit consists of finding transistors and circuit designs to perform the voltage to input current regulation function without limiting overall system performance.

OUTPUT TO TTL INTERFACE

The 6N136 and 6N137 have sufficiently high input to output coupling efficiency (CTR) that the only component required to interface the optocoupler to a TTL input gate is a pull-up resistor. The 6N135 has a somewhat lower CTR and requires an external transistor and resistor to interface with a TTL gate input. The actual circuit configuration and values required for these interface circuits are illustrated in Figures 3 through 8. The circuits illustrate, in general, the optimum interface for a TTL-TTL compatible circuit. Performance could be improved through the use of lower pull-up resistor values in the coupler output collectors and high speed TTL compatible comparators.

Table 1

IMPORTANT LINE CHARACTERISTICS OF BELDEN 8777

- Three sets of two conductor, twisted and individually foil shielded, 22 gauge wire
- Z_0 (Measured Characteristic Impedance)—68Ω line to line
- Line-to-line capacitance — 30pF/ft.
- Line Resistance — 3.2Ω/100 ft. (per conductor pair)
- Attenuation at 10MHz ≃ 4 dB/100 ft.
- Delay ≃ 1.5 nsec/ft.
- Cost ≈ 5¢/ft./Transmission Pair

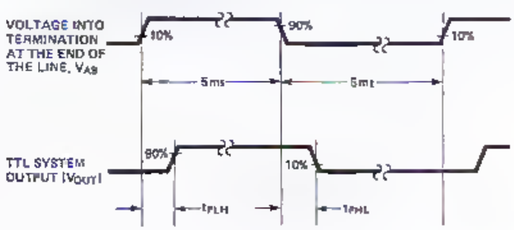
GLOSSARY

1. DATA RATE – This term is typically stated in bits per second and has no standardized definition when used in reference to optocouplers. It is related to the minimum pulse transition time that will be passed by the system and detected. This in turn is related to the distortion or change in duration the pulse experiences upon passing through the system.

2. STEP TRANSIENT DATA RATE MAXIMUM – This term, stated in bits per second, is a function of the maximum delay experienced by a 0/1 or a 1/0 transition in passing through the optocoupler. The step transient data rate maximum is defined as:

$$\text{STEP TRANSIENT DATA RATE (MAX)} = \frac{1}{t_{PHL}} \text{ or } \frac{1}{t_{PLH}}$$

whichever is smaller. Where t_{PLH} and t_{PHL} are measured at the coupler termination input (end of the line) and the TTL output and are defined as follows:

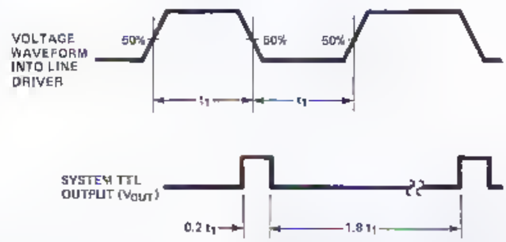


The t_{PHL} and t_{PLH} measured under these conditions approach the maximum delay that will be experienced by data sent through the isolator.

3. MAXIMUM CLOCK DATA RATE – This term defines the maximum data rate at which a 50% duty cycle square wave (clock) will be distorted to a 90%/10% pulse. It is very close to the maximum alternating 1/0 and 0/1 transition that can be passed by the system. It is defined mathematically as:

$$\text{MAXIMUM CLOCK DATA RATE} = \frac{1}{t_1}$$

where t_1 is defined as:



4. COMMON MODE REJECTION VOLTAGE – This term is defined as the maximum sinusoidal voltage at a given frequency that can be applied *simultaneously* to both inputs with respect to output ground and not produce an error signal in the system output. In optocouplers, the value of this voltage is very high at low frequencies and decreases with increasing frequency until it reaches a minimum. The effect is caused by the effective intercircuit capacitance of the emitter and detector chips, and the detector gain and bandwidth. (See Figure 11.)

5. COMMON MODE dv/dt REJECTION MINIMUM – This term is defined as the maximum rate of change of voltage that can be applied to both inputs *simultaneously* with respect to output ground and not produce an error in the system output. Note that this parameter is a function of the duration of the change, or equivalently the pulse amplitude. The stated values in this application note are for a 10V step pulse amplitude generated by a source having a controlled risetime and falltime (e.g., HP 8007B). (See Figure 11.)

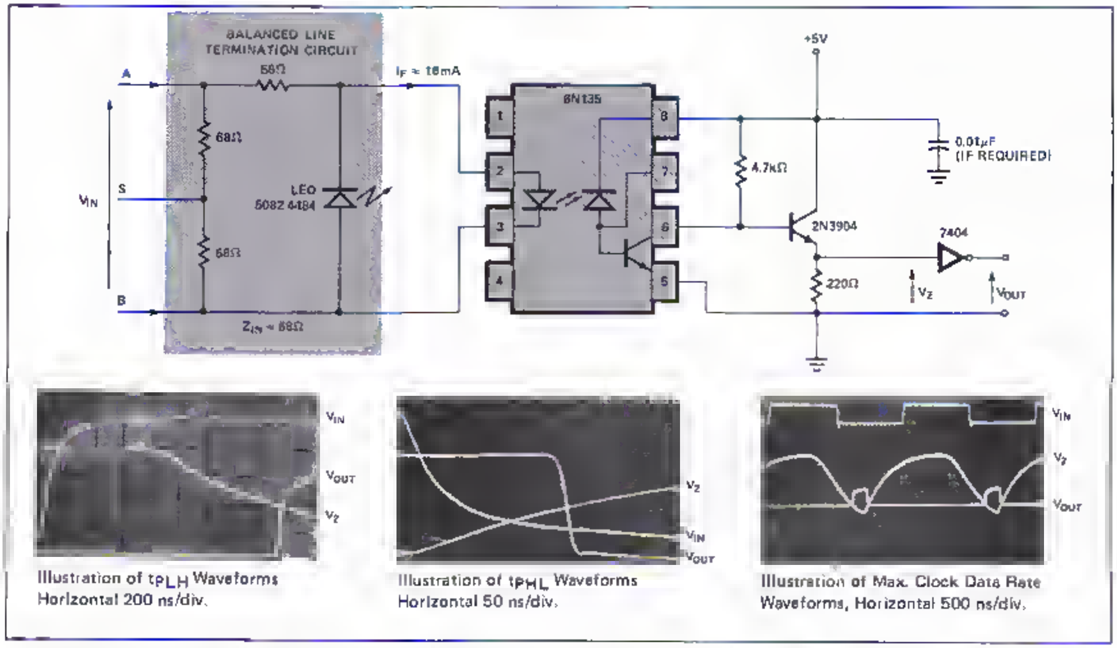


Figure 3. TTL Compatible Passive (Resistive) Termination for the 6N135 and Photographs Indicating Measured Performance at the End of the 300 Ft. Transmission Cable.

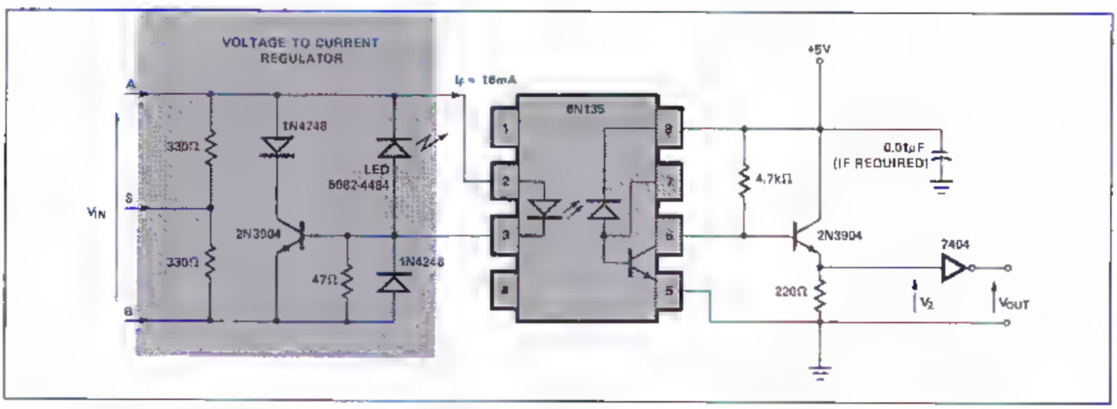


Figure 6. TTL Compatible Active Termination for the 6N135.

Table 2. Summary of Performance of 6N135 Data Transmission Systems at 1, 100, and 300 ft.

Termination	Transmission Distance (ft)	t_{PLH} (ns)	t_{PHL} (ns)	Step Transient Data Rate Max. (Mbits/s)	Clock Data Rate Max. (Mbits/s)	Worst Case Common Mode Noise Rejection: Sinusoidal	dV/dt
RESISTIVE (PASSIVE)	1	475	500	2.0	11.2	≤10kHz: 5.0kV pk-pk	250V/µs min.
	100	900	425	1.1	3.0		
Fig. 3.	300	1700	300	0.6	0.8	1MHz: 84V pk-pk min.	
ACTIVE	1	500	330	2.0	5.3		
Fig. 6	100	580	270	1.7	4.0		
	300	875	330	1.1	1.6		

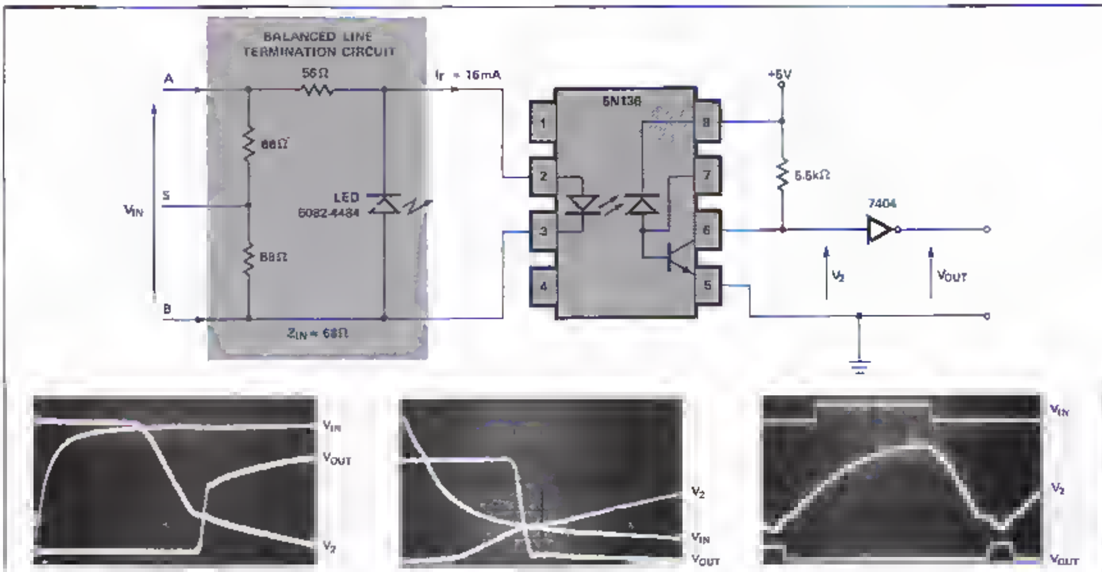


Illustration of tPLH Waveforms
Horizontal 200 ns/div.

Illustration of tPHL Waveforms
Horizontal 50 ns/div.

Illustration of Max. Clock Data Rate
Waveforms, Horizontal 200 ns/div.

Figure 4. TTL Compatible Passive (Resistive) Termination for the 6N136 and Photographs Indicating Measured Performance at the End of the 300 Ft Cable.

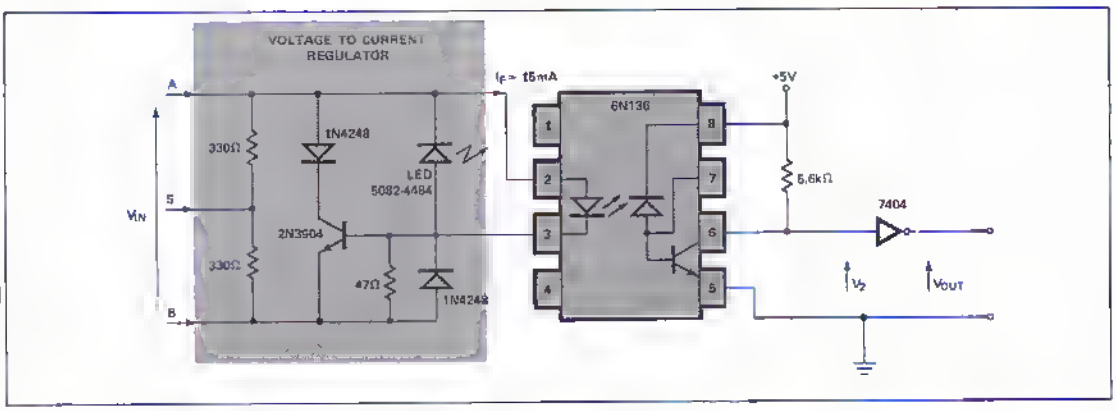


Figure 7. TTL Compatible Active Termination for the 6N136.

Table 3. Summary of Performance of 6N136 Data Transmission Systems at 1, 100, and 300 ft.

	Transmission Distance (ft)	tPLH (ns)	tPHL (ns)	Step Transient Data Rate Max. (Mbits/s)	Clock Data Rate Max. (Mbits/s)	Worst Case Common Mode Noise Rejection	
						Sinusoidal	dV/dt
RESISTIVE (PASSIVE)	1	320	270	2.7	10.0	<10kHz: 5.0kV pk-pk	250V/μs min.
	100	640	265	1.6	4.0		
Fig. 4	300	1200	220	0.8	1.2	1MHz: 84V pk-pk min.	
ACTIVE	1	375	250	2.7	6.6		
Fig. 7	100	440	250	2.3	5.0		
	300	700	250	1.4	2.4		

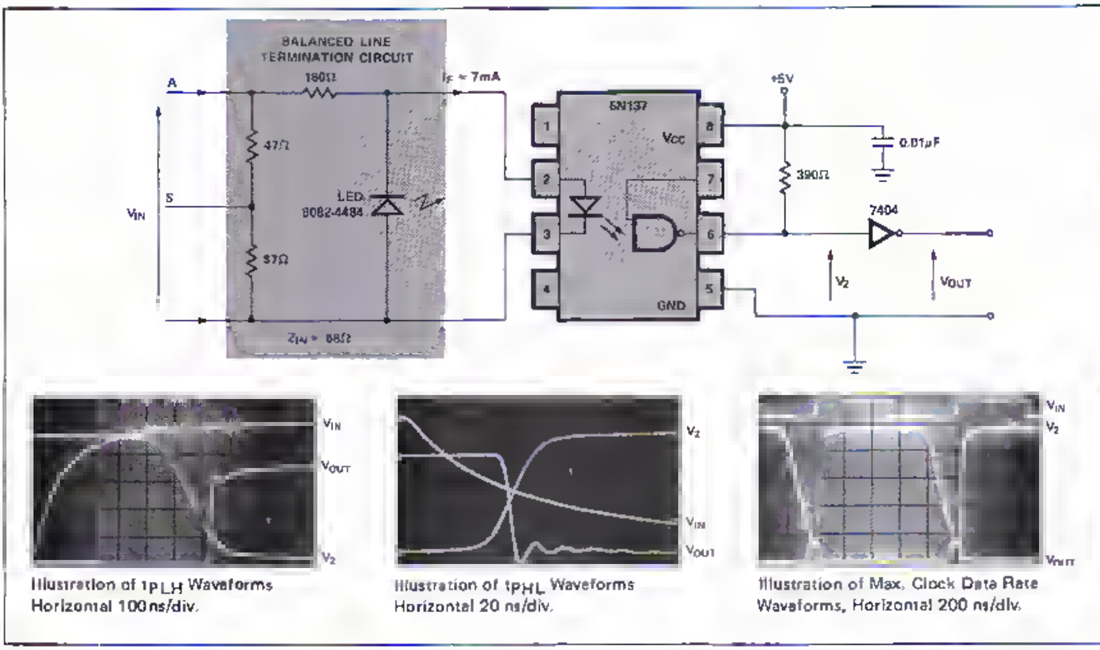


Figure 5. TTL Compatible Passive (Resistive) Termination for the 6N137 and Photographs Indicating Measured Performance at the End of the 300 Ft. Transmission Cable.

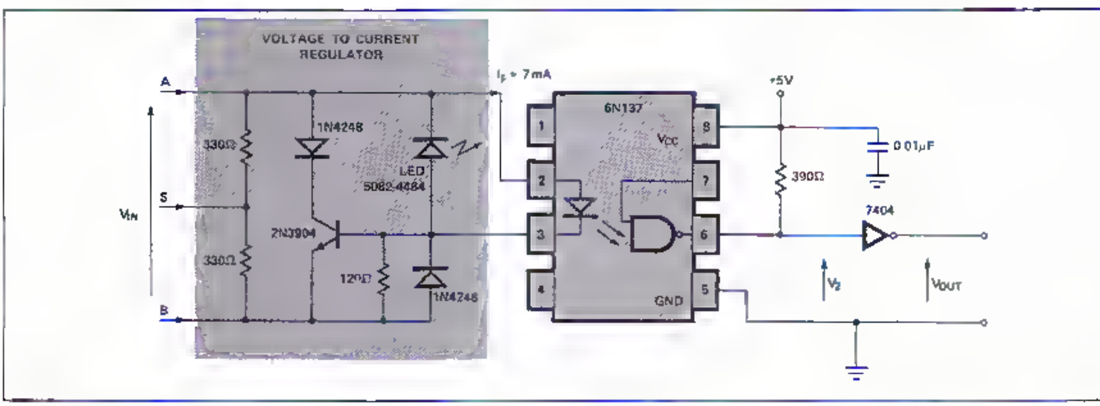


Figure 6. TTL Compatible Active Termination for the 6N137.

Table 4. Summary of Performance of 6N137 Data Transmission Systems at 1, 100, and 300 ft.

	Transmission Distance (ft)	t_{PLH} (ns)	t_{PHL} (ns)	Step Transient Data Rate Max. (Mbits/s)	Clock Data Rate Max. (Mbits/s)	Worst Case Common Mode Noise Rejection: Sinusoidal	Worst Case Common Mode Noise Rejection: dV/dt
RESISTIVE (PASSIVE)	1	105	70	9.5	19.0	≤10kHz: 5.0kV pk-pk; 8MHz: 22V pk-pk min.	40V/µs min.
	100	170	70	5.8	8.0		
	300	625	70	1.6	2.0		
ACTIVE	1	190	65	5.3	11.0		
	100	190	70	5.3	13.2		
	300	275	80	3.9	8.2		

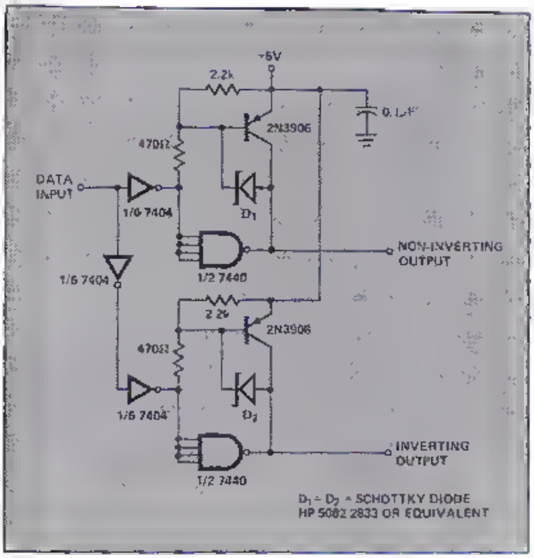


Figure 9. High Output Voltage Swing, High Current, Wide Bandwidth Line Driver that Operates From a 5 Volt Supply and Produces a >8.5V Pk to Pk Pulse into 300 Ft. of Belden 8777 at 10 MHz.

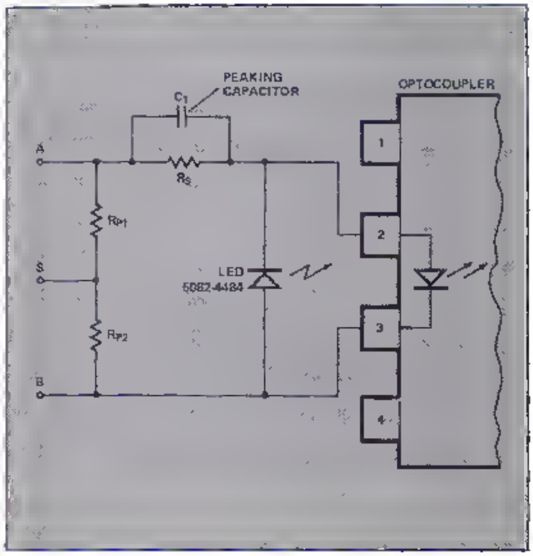


Figure 10. An Example of Circuit Peaking to Improve the Performance of the Passive Termination. C_1 is Chosen for the Minimum Value that Significantly Reduces Input to Output Delay Time. In General, C_1 Must be Selected Individually For Each System.

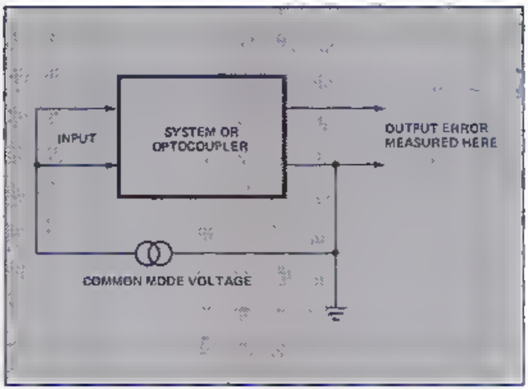


Figure 11. Common Mode Measurement Circuit.