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MISC

[Search & Index](#)
[Parts List](#)
[Robot Forum](#)
[AI Chat](#)
[Member Pages](#)
[Axon MCU](#)
[Shop](#)
[Robot Books](#)
[Contact](#)

SKILLS

[How To Build](#)
[A Robot](#)
[Tutorial](#)
[Calculators](#)
[Mechanics](#)
[Programming](#)
[Miscellaneous](#)
[Robots](#)

HARDWARE

[Actuators](#)
[Batteries](#)
[Electronics](#)
[Materials](#)
[Microcontrollers](#)
[Sensors](#)

SCIENCE

[Robot Journals](#)
[Robot Theory](#)
[Conferences](#)

ACTUATORS - SERVOS



[Wiring](#)
[Control](#)
[Current, Torque](#)
[Gears](#)
[Velocity](#)
[Efficiency, Noise](#)
[Voltage Regulation](#)
[Digital vs Analog Servos](#)
[Hitec vs Futaba](#)

Click to learn how to [modify a servo](#) for continuous rotation.

Click to learn how to [waterproof a servo](#) for continuous rotation.

What is a Servo?

Servos are **DC motors** with built in **gearing** and **feedback control loop circuitry**. And no motor drivers required!

Synopsis

Servos are extremely popular with robot, RC plane, and RC boat builders. Most servo motors can rotate about 90 to 180 degrees. Some rotate through a full 360 degrees or more. However, servos are unable to continually rotate, meaning they can't be used for driving wheels (unless **modified**), but their precision positioning makes them ideal for **robot arms** and legs, rack and pinion steering, and sensor scanners to name a few. Since servos are fully self contained, the velocity and angle control loops are very easy to impliment, while prices remain very affordable. To use a servo, simply connect the black wire to ground, the red to a 4.8-6V source, and the yellow/white wire to a signal generator (such as from your **microcontroller**). Vary the square wave pulse width from 1-2ms and your servo is now position/velocity controlled.

Learn how to [mount wheels onto servos](#).

Learn how to [mount servos onto a robot chassis](#).

Servo Wiring

All servos have three wires:

Black or **Brown** is for ground.

Red is for power (~4.8-6V).

Yellow, **Orange**, or **White** is the **signal** wire (3-5V).

Servo Voltage (Red and Black/Brown wires)

Servos can operate under a range of voltages. Typical operation is from **4.8V to 6V**. There are a few micro sized servos that can operate at less, and now a few Hitec servos that operate at much more. The reason for this standard range is because most microcontrollers and RC receivers operate near this voltage. So what voltage should you operate at? Well, unless you have a **battery**

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voltage/current/power limitation, you should operate at 6V. This is simply because DC motors have higher torque at higher voltages.

Signal Wire (Yellow/Orange/White wire)

While the black and red wires provide power to the motor, the signal wire is what you use to command the servo. The general concept is to simply send an ordinary logic **square wave** to your servo at a specific wave length, and your servo goes to a particular angle (or velocity if your servo is modified). *The wavelength directly maps to servo angle.*

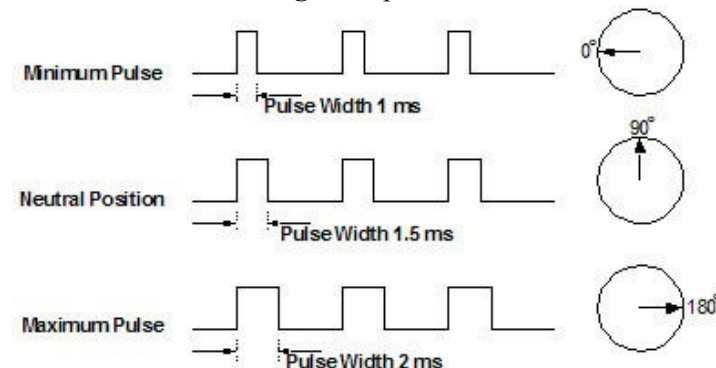
So how do you apply this square wave to your servo? If your robot is **remote controlled**, your RC receiver will apply the proper square wave for you. If however your robot is running from a **microcontroller**, you must:

bring high a digital port
wait between 1-2ms
bring low the same digital port
cycle a few dozen times per second

Note, if you are running multiple servos simultaneously, you can just put a few of these program blocks in sequential order. You can run as many servos as you have of digital ports.

So how many milliseconds do you keep the port high? It all depends on the servo. You may have to tweak for each individual servo some several microseconds difference.

The standard **time vs. angle** is represented in this chart:



Servo Current

Servo current operates the same as in a DC motor, except that you now also have a hard to predict feedback control system to contend with. If your DC motor is not at the specified angle, it will suddenly draw huge amounts of current to reach that angle. But there are other peculiarities as well. If you run an experiment with a servo at a fixed angle and hang precision weights from the servo horn, the **measured current** will not be what you expect. One would think that the current would increase at some fixed rate as the weights increased linearly. Instead you will get unpredictable curves and multiple rates.

In conclusion, *servo current draw is very unpredictable.*

Stall Torque, Stall Current, Current Drain

Since servos contain DC motors, please read my **DC motor tutorial** to learn about servo stall characteristics.



Gear Types

More expensive servos come with metal gears for higher torque and longer life, followed by karbonite and then nylon gears for the cheapest.

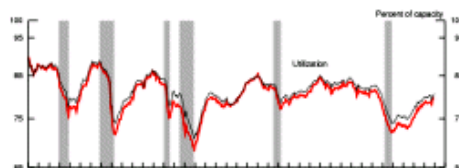
Nylon Gears - Nylon gears are most common in servos. They are extremely smooth with little or no wear factors. They are also very lightweight, but lack in durability and strength.

Karbonite Gears - Karbonite gears are relatively new to the market. They offer almost 5 times the strength of nylon gears and also better wear resistance. Cycle times of well over 300,000 have been observed with these gears with virtually no wear. Servos with these gears are more expensive but what you get in durability is more than equaled.

Metal Gears - Metal gears have been around for sometime now. Although the heaviest and having the highest wear rate of all gear types, they offer unparalleled strength. With a metal output shaft, side-loads can be much greater. Ever had a nylon output shaft crack? I have. In applications that are jarred around, metal gears are best. Unfortunately, due to wear, metal gears will eventually develop slight play in the gear-train. Accuracy will slowly be lost.

Velocity

The servo turn rate, or **transit time**, is used for determining servo rotational velocity. This is the amount of time it takes for the servo to move a set amount, usually 60 degrees. For example, suppose you have a servo with a transit time of 0.17sec/60 degrees at no load. This means it would take nearly half a second to rotate an entire 180 degrees. More if the servo were under a load. This information is very important if high servo response speed is a requirement of your robot application. It is also useful for determining the maximum forward velocity of your robot if your servo is modified for full rotation. Remember, the worst case turning time is when the servo is at the minimum rotation angle and is then commanded to go to maximum rotation angle, all while under load. This can take several seconds on a very high torque servo.



Efficiency and Noise

Due to noise and control circuitry requirements, servos are less efficient than DC motors uncontrolled. To begin with, the control circuitry typically drains 5-8mA just on idle. Secondly, noise can more than triple current draw during a holding position

(not moving), and almost double current during rotation.

Noise is often a major source of servo inefficiency and therefore should be avoided. Ever notice your servo **jitter** or vibrate? This is because your servo is rapidly jumping between two different angles due to interference. What causes this interference? Well the signal wire is no different than a long antennae, capable of accepting unwanted foreign signals and sending them straight to your servo as a command. A common interference source is usually from other nearby servos and/or servo wiring. How to prevent this problem? Keep your signal wire short, meaning do not add say 3+ feet of extension cables to your servo. If you have many servo wires going through one area, and it isn't feasible to keep them apart, then twist them together. Supposedly this reduces **cross interference** and I've heard it works, although I cannot really tell for sure myself. You can also buy something called a servo **booster extension** which buffers and amplifies the signal.

Regulating Voltage to a Servo

As you should already know, servos have a voltage rating. Go above that voltage and your servo overheats and possibly fries. So suppose you have a 7.2V battery and you want to use a 5V regulator to power your servos, is that a good idea?

Short answer: No!

Longer answer . . . it will work, but its a huge waste of battery power.

So lets say you have your 7.2V regulated to 5V and the servos draw a total of 1.5A of current.

Wasted power is:

$$(7.2V - 5V) * 1.5A = \underline{3.3W}$$

Percentage wise, its

$$(7.2V - 5V) / 7.2V = \underline{30.6\%}$$

Thats the battery energy percentage wasted to thermal heat - almost 1/3rd!!!

Speaking of heat, your voltage regulator probably has thermal shutdown, meaning that if it overheats it will throttle down current to your servos - meaning your servos will have lower torque and lower speed. If your voltage regulator doesn't have thermal shutdown, it will just fry instead (not a good thing).

But if you still really really need to regulate for servos, get a switching regulator (like ~83% efficiency on average).



Digital Servos vs Analog Servos

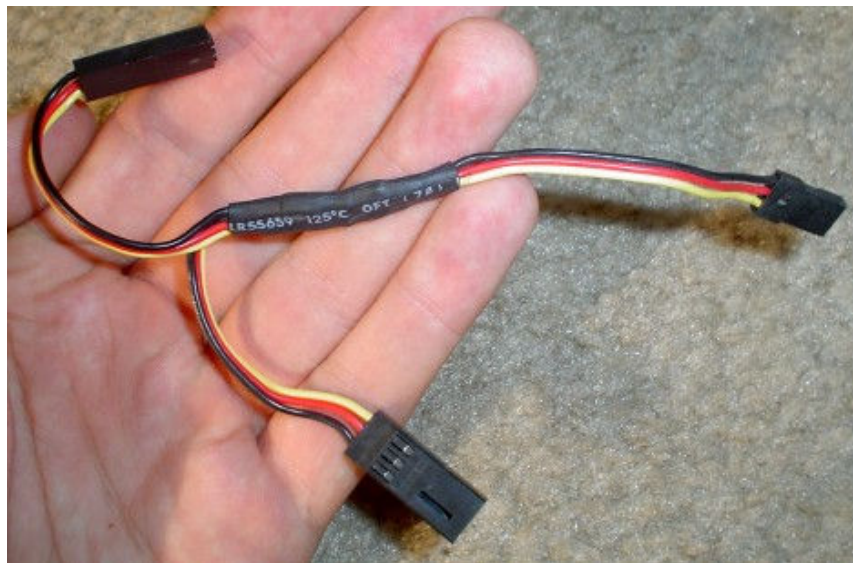
What is the difference between an analog and digital servo?

Digital servos, at the user end, are controlled no differently than analog servos. The difference is in how the servo motor is controlled via the circuit board (amplifier). The motor of an analog servo receives a signal from the amplifier 30 times a second or at 30Hz. This signal allows the amplifier to update the motor position. Digital servos use a high frequency amplifier that updates the servo motor position 300 times a second or at 300Hz. By updating the motor position more often, the digital servo can deliver full torque from the beginning of movement and increases the holding power of the servo. The quick refresh also allows the digital servo to have a tighter deadband.

With the exception of a higher **cost**, there are only advantages for digital servos over analog servos.

The digital micro processor is **10 times faster** than an analog servo. This results in a much quicker response from the beginning with the servo developing all the rated torque 1 degree off of the center point. Be aware that this faster response also results in higher starting currents, so make sure your **batteries** can handle it.

Digital servos **can be programmed** for direction of rotation, center and end points, failsafe option, speed, and dead bandwidth adjustment. This is great for matching sets of servos for deadband width, center and end points in giant scale aircraft applications, and for reversing a digital servo when two are used on a "Y" harness (below image).



If you do not want to deal with the added complication of programming, no worries! Hitec digital servos will perform like standard servos out of the box. It is not required to program them before use.

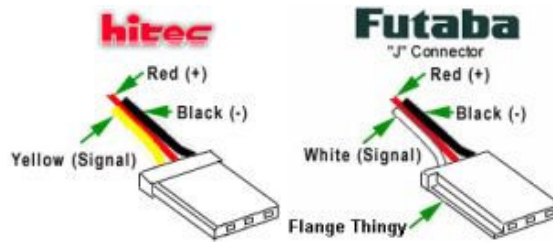
The standing torque of a digital servo is 3 times that of its analog counterpart. This means digital servos are typically smaller and have more torque.

What about **servo modification**? Digital servos are also modifiable, just check the **datasheet** to make sure.

Hitec vs Futaba

There are actually four major servo manufacturers - Hitec, Futaba, Airtronics, and JR Radios. The last two are uncommon today, so I won't talk about them. Hitec

and Futaba servos work the same, but there are several interfacing differences which you should be aware of



The first is **wire color**, as Hitec uses a yellow signal wire while Futaba uses a white one. The wiring order is the same, just different colors.

The second is **connector** compatibility. Futaba (J type) has a special flange thingy while Hitec (S type, for universal) does not. Futaba has the extra flange to help the user plug in the servo correctly, although there are only two ways to do it and connecting a servo in the wrong way will not actually damage anything. If you want to connect a Futaba servo to a Hitec device, just clip the flange off and use sandpaper to file it down until it fits. If you ever need to connect a Hitec connector to something Futaba, just use sandpaper to decrease the connector width until it fits.

The third is **price**. All things kept the same, Hitec servos are cheaper than Futaba servos. But don't let this be your only determining factor in your decision, as Futaba has some **servo sizes** that Hitec does not.

The last major difference is in the **spline**. The spline is the output shaft of the servo. This is where you would attach your **servo horn** or **servo arm**. Standard Hitec splines have **24** teeth while standard Futaba splines have **25** teeth. What makes this important is that servo horns built for one will not work with the other.

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