

# VHDL notes

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version: c9e0cb3

## **Abstract**

Set of VHDL related notes. It addresses topics ranging from coding conventions, verification, synthesis, optimisation, reusability and documentation. Some notes are vague while others are quite specific to tools or target platforms. Also, it addresses a wide audience, so some materials may seem obvious to the reader, depending on her background.

# Contents

1	Unconstrained types	3
2	Type attributes	5
3	Generics instead of package constants	6
4	Per component test benches	7
5	Hardware resource inference	8
6	Explicit resource instantiation	9
7	Reset signals	10
8	Shift registers inference	11
9	Assertions	12
10	Test benches as documentation	13
11	Writing synchronous processes	14
12	Clocking	15
13	Appropriate typing	16
14	Component directory structure	17

# 1 Unconstrained types

*topics: reusability, documentation, verification*

When not explicitly specified by the developer, a type length is deduced during component instantiation. This favors component reusability by letting the user decide of the type length according to its particular needs.

For instance, *count* range is unconstrained in the following component declaration:

```
component my_component
port
(
  ...
  count: in unsigned;
  ...
);
```

The actual range is deduced during instantiation:

```
signal count: unsigned(7 downto 0);

work.my_component
port map
(
  ...
  count => count
  ...
);
```

One important issue with unconstrained types is that a component user may inadvertently use types that are larger than required, possibly leading to unnecessary large resource instantiation. Documentation is a good tool to solve this kind of issue. Also, assertions can be used to check for degenerate cases:

```

component my_component
port
(
    ...
    — WARNING
    — hardware comparator inferred in subsequent logic
    — use appropriate length
    count: in unsigned;
    ...
);
end component;

```

If you want to make sure the length fits within a given range, use assertion in the component entity definition:

```

entity my_component
port
(
    ...
    count: in unsigned;
    ...
);
end my_component;

architecture my_component_rtl of my_component is
begin
    ...
    assert (count'length <= 16)
    report "invalid_counter_length"
    severity failure;
    ...
end my_component_rtl;

```

## 2 Type attributes

Use type attribute as much as possible, esp. type'length and type'range

### 3 Generics instead of package constants

*topics: reusability*

Often, a component parameter can be set either using generic or package constants. Using package constants forces the user to modify your package. On the other hand, generics let the user specialize the component without modifying any existing source.

## 4 Per component test benches

*topics: simulation*

Per component test benches generally requires less code than project wide ones. It makes them easier to maintain, and encourages the developer to write self contained components. Also, it makes simulation run faster.

## 5 Hardware resource inference

*topics: synthesis*

Usually, a VHDL developer does not explicitly indicate what hardware resource to use to implement logic. The synthesiser deduces that from its source code understanding (ie. signal netlist and operations). This process is known as inference.

Inference is very sensitive to the way code is written. For instance, the use of an additional signal to reset a shift register may prevent the synthesiser to infer a hardware shift register.

Thus, VHDL developers try as much as possible to write code in a standard way, that is known to be well understood by the synthesiser.



## 6 Explicit resource instantiation

*topics: synthesis*

**TODO:** wip

Non portable but sure to instanciate the right resource.

## 7 Reset signals

*related notes: 11*

Avoid reset signals. If not possible, make reset synchronous.

**TODO:** explain why

## 8 Shift registers inference

*topics: synthesis*

**TODO:** wip

XILINX FPGAs have hardware resources to implement shift registers. Reference here (p.78):  
[http://www.xilinx.com/support/documentation/sw\\_manuals/xilinx2014\\_1/ug901-vivado-synthesis.pdf](http://www.xilinx.com/support/documentation/sw_manuals/xilinx2014_1/ug901-vivado-synthesis.pdf)

## 9 Assertions

*topics: verification*

**TODO:** wip

Use assertion to check data type lengths when unconstraints arrays

## 10 Test benches as documentation

*topics: documentation*

A component developer should consider test benches an important part of the documentation since they are used as reference materials by the component user. Thus, test benches should be up to date, clearly written and well documented. If possible, they should cover different use cases, without flooding the user with unrequired contents.

## 11 Writing synchronous processes

*topics: synthesis*

There is one standard way of writing synchronous process:

```
process (clk , rst)
begin
  if rising_edge (clk) then
    if rst = '1' then
      else
    end if;
  end if;
end process;
```

Another way which is synthetizable:

```
process
begin
  wait until rising_edge (clk);

  if rst = '1' then
    end if;

end process;
```

Since the **wait** statement must come first, all the signal are synchronous, esp. the reset. Also, this convention results in a somewhat clearer code.

## 12 Clocking

**TODO:** wip

Clear convention about how data passed to/from a component are clocked. by default, clocked using the component domain. idem for latching.

## 13 Appropriate typing

*topics: verification, documentation*

Use the most specialized types (unsigned, boolean ...) and sizes early in the design hierarchy. It avoids further casting and simplifies the code. It acts as documentation since the reader deduces information from the type itself. For instance, an unsigned counter tells it can not be negative. Typing also improve static time checks.



## 14 Component directory structure

*topics: reusability, documentation*

Having a clear, self contained directory structure is helpful for both the user and the developer. I opted for the following one, that simple but fits most of the cases:

```
my_component /
src /
  my_component_pkg.vhd
  my_component_rtl.vhd
  ...
sim /
  common /
    main_tb.vhd
  isim /
    isim.tcl
    isim.prj
    isim.sh
  modelsim /
    ...
syn /
  ise /
    xc7k325t.ucf
    xc7vx485t.ucf
  vivado /
    ...
doc /
  my_component.pdf
```

Providing synthesis files allows the user to synthesise the component for a given platform. It should not synthesise a full working design, only the bare minimum so the user can check its toolchain (esp. version), and investigate what hardware resources are inferred.