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## I. OVERCURRENT PROTECTION FUNDAMENTALS (FUSES AND HOW THEY WORK)

### Introduction

An important part of developing quality overcurrent protection is an understanding of system needs and overcurrent protective device fundamentals. This section discusses these topics with special attention to the application of fuses. If you have additional questions, call our Technical Support Group at 1-800-TEC-FUSE (1-800-832-3873). Definitions of terms used in this section are located towards the end of this Technical Application Guide.

### Why Overcurrent Protection?

All electrical systems eventually experience overcurrents. Unless removed in time, even moderate overcurrents quickly overheat system components, damaging insulation, conductors, and equipment. Large overcurrents may melt conductors and vaporize insulation. Very high currents produce magnetic forces that bend and twist bus bars. These high currents can pull cables from their terminals and crack insulators and spacers.

Too frequently, fires, explosions, poisonous fumes and panic accompany uncontrolled overcurrents. This not only damages electrical systems and equipment, but may cause injury or death to personnel nearby.

To reduce these hazards, the National Electrical Code® (NEC®), OSHA regulations, and other applicable design and installation standards require overcurrent protection that will disconnect overloaded or faulted equipment.

Industry and governmental organizations have developed performance standards for overcurrent devices and testing procedures that show compliance with the standards and with the NEC. These organizations include: the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA), and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), all of which work in conjunction with Nationally Recognized Testing Laboratories (NRTL) such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL).

Electrical systems must meet applicable code requirements including those for overcurrent protection before electric utilities are allowed to provide electric power to a facility.

### What is Quality Overcurrent Protection?

A system with quality overcurrent protection has the following characteristics:

1. Meets all legal requirements, such as NEC®, OSHA, local codes, etc.
2. Provides maximum safety for personnel, exceeding minimum code requirements as necessary.
3. Minimizes overcurrent damage to property, equipment, and electrical systems.
4. Provides coordinated protection. Only the protective device immediately on the line side of an overcurrent opens to protect the system and minimize unnecessary downtime.
5. Is cost effective while providing reserve interrupting capacity for future growth.
6. Consists of equipment and components not subject to obsolescence and requiring only minimum maintenance that can be performed by regular maintenance personnel using readily available tools and equipment.

### Overcurrent Types and Effects

An overcurrent is any current that exceeds the ampere rating of conductors, equipment, or devices under conditions of use. The term "overcurrent" includes both overloads and short-circuits.

### Overloads

An overload is an overcurrent confined to normal current paths in which there is no insulation breakdown.

Sustained overloads are commonly caused by installing excessive equipment such as additional lighting fixtures or too many motors. Sustained overloads are also caused by overloading mechanical equipment and by equipment breakdown such as failed bearings. If not disconnected within established time limits, sustained overloads eventually overheat circuit components causing thermal damage to insulation and other system components.

Overcurrent protective devices must disconnect circuits and equipment experiencing continuous or sustained overloads before overheating occurs. Even moderate insulation overheating can seriously reduce the life of the components and/or equipment involved. For example, motors overloaded by just 15% may experience less than 50% of normal insulation life.

Temporary overloads occur frequently. Common causes include temporary equipment overloads such as a machine tool taking too deep of a cut, or simply the starting of an inductive load such as a motor. Since temporary overloads are by definition harmless, overcurrent protective devices should not open or clear the circuit.

It is important to realize that fuses selected must have sufficient time-delay to allow motors to start and temporary overloads to subside. However, should the overcurrent continue, fuses must then open before system components are damaged. Littelfuse POWR-PRO® and POWR-GARD® time-delay fuses are designed to meet these types of protective needs. In general, time-delay fuses hold 500% of the rated current for a minimum of ten seconds, yet will still open quickly on higher values of current.

Even though government-mandated high-efficiency motors and NEMA Design E motors have much higher locked rotor currents, POWR-PRO® time-delay fuses such as the FLSR_ID, LLSRK_ID, or IDSR series have sufficient time-delay to permit motors to start when the fuses are properly selected in accordance with the NEC®.

## Short-Circuits

A short-circuit is an overcurrent flowing outside of its normal path. Types of short-circuits are generally divided into three categories: bolted faults, arcing faults, and ground faults. Each type of short-circuit is defined in the Terms and Definitions section.

A short-circuit is caused by an insulation breakdown or faulty connection. During a circuit's normal operation, the connected load determines current. When a short-circuit occurs, the current bypasses the normal load and takes a "shorter path," hence the term 'short-circuit'. Since there is no load impedance, the only factor limiting current flow is the total distribution system's impedance from the utility's generators to the point of fault.

A typical electrical system might have a normal load impedance of 10 ohms. But in a single-phase situation, the same system might have a load impedance of 0.005 ohms or less. In order to compare the two scenarios, it is best to apply Ohm's Law (I = E/R for AC systems). A 480 volt single-phase circuit with the 10 ohm load impedance would draw 48 amperes (480/10 = 48). If the same circuit has a 0.005 ohm system impedance when the load is shorted, the available fault current would increase significantly to 96,000 amperes (480/0.005 = 96,000).

As stated, short-circuits are currents that flow outside of their normal path. Regardless of the magnitude of overcurrent, the excessive current must be removed quickly. If not removed promptly, the large currents associated with short-circuits may have three profound effects on an electrical system: heating, magnetic stress, and arcing.

*Heating* occurs in every part of an electrical system when current passes through the system. When overcurrents are large enough, heating is practically instantaneous. The energy in such overcurrents is measured in ampere-squared seconds ($I^2t$). An overcurrent of 10,000 amperes that lasts for 0.01 seconds has an $I^2t$ of 1,000,000 $A^2s$. If the current could be reduced from 10,000 amperes to 1,000 amperes for the same period of time, the corresponding $I^2t$ would be reduced to 10,000 $A^2s$, or just one percent of the original value.

If the current in a conductor increases 10 times, the $I^2t$ increases 100 times. A current of only 7,500 amperes can melt a #8 AWG copper wire in 0.1 second. Within eight milliseconds (0.008 seconds or one-half cycle), a current of 6,500 amperes can raise the temperature of #12 AWG THHN thermoplastic insulated copper wire from its operating temperature of 75°C to its maximum short-circuit temperature of 150°C. Any currents larger than this may immediately vaporize organic insulations. Arcs at the point of fault or from mechanical switching such as automatic transfer switches or circuit breakers may ignite the vapors causing violent explosions and electrical flash.

*Magnetic stress* (or force) is a function of the peak current squared. Fault currents of 100,000 amperes can exert forces of more than 7,000 lb. per foot of bus bar. Stresses of this magnitude may damage insulation, pull conductors from terminals, and stress equipment terminals sufficiently such that significant damage occurs.

*Arcing* at the point of fault melts and vaporizes all of the conductors and components involved in the fault. The arcs often burn through raceways and equipment enclosures, showering the area with molten metal that quickly starts fires and/or injures any personnel in the area. Additional short-circuits are often created when vaporized material is deposited on insulators and other surfaces. Sustained arcing-faults vaporize organic insulation, and the vapors may explode or burn.

Whether the effects are heating, magnetic stress, and/or arcing, the potential damage to electrical systems can be significant as a result of short-circuits occurring.

## II. SELECTION CONSIDERATIONS

### Selection Considerations for Fuses (600 volts and below)

Since overcurrent protection is crucial to reliable electrical system operation and safety, overcurrent device selection and application should be carefully considered. When selecting fuses, the following parameters or considerations need to be evaluated:

- Current Rating
- Voltage Rating
- Interrupting Rating
- Type of Protection and Fuse Characteristics
- Current Limitation
- Physical Size
- Indication

## Current Rating

The current rating of a fuse is the AC or DC current, expressed in amperes, which the fuse is capable of carrying continuously under specified conditions. Fuses selected for a circuit must have ampere ratings that meet NEC® requirements, namely those found in NEC® Articles 240 and 430. These NEC® requirements establish maximum ratings and in some cases, minimum ratings. When selecting a fuse, it is generally recommended to select a current rating as close as possible to the system's normal running current.