

Level Shifting Between 1.8V and 3.3V Using I2C Buffers

As the trend in low voltage microcontrollers migrates to 1.8V logic levels, I²C bus systems will need logic level shifting to communicate with 3.3V I²C slave devices. Without level shifting, the output logic levels of mixed voltage devices are not capable of properly driving the input logic thresholds of the I²C devices on the bus. A common solution uses an I²C buffer with level shifting capability to translate the 1.8V signals to levels compliant with the slave devices with the higher supply voltage. Level shifting I²C buffers have two supply pins (e.g. V_{CC1} and V_{CC2}); one connects to the higher voltage for slave devices and the other to the lower voltage for the microcontroller supply. Internally, the I²C buffer level shifts the I²C signals between the two supply voltages.

While there are new I²C buffers in the market that are capable of operating down to 1.8V, some buffers are not. These buffers may be of an older design that is not operational down to 1.8V but they may include desirable features not available in the new buffers (e.g. rise time accelerators that actively drive the bus to the logic high levels). Rise time accelerators provide an active source current to improve rise times, allowing longer bus lengths or higher bus capacitances. This method is preferred over using smaller pull-up resistors to increase rise times as the accelerator current is only active during a low to high transition. A pull-up resistor must sink its load current the entire time the I²C bus drives low.

Whether the I²C bus designer does not want to replace every 3.3V I²C buffer in the system due to cost or legacy compliance reasons or because the special features of a 3.3V buffer are desired, an interface to the 1.8V microcontroller is needed. A simple application solution can achieve the 1.8V logic level shifting while keeping the I²C buffer within its operating voltage range. A zener voltage regulator is used to drop the 3.3V bus down to the minimum operating voltage of the buffer specified in the datasheet. A few design considerations are necessary to prevent the rise time accelerators from over driving the 1.8V supply rail.

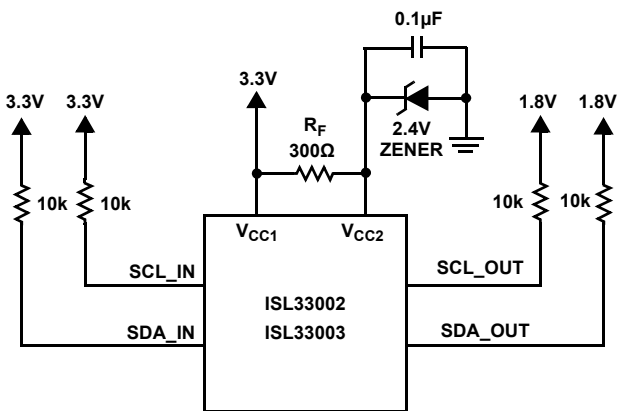


FIGURE 1. APPLICATION CIRCUIT

For example, Intersil's ISL33002 and ISL33003 (FN7560) are two channel I²C buffers with rise time accelerators and logic level shifting. Their minimum operating supply voltage is 2.3V so they cannot directly level shift down to 1.8V. Using a standard 2.4V zener diode to voltage regulate off the 3.3V bus while using bus pull-up resistors to 1.8V allows the buffer to level shift 1.8V to 3.3V. See Figure 1. Operating at 2.4V minimizes the overvoltage drive the rise time accelerators place on the 1.8V bus. Some design considerations for the bus designer are:

1. Sizing the current limiting resistor (R_f) for the zener regulator to operate beyond the knee voltage while sourcing enough current to power the buffer. The voltage variation of the zener regulator must handle the static and dynamic current on the 2.4V supply to the I²C buffer. The proper R_f resistor guarantees the voltage will not go below the minimum operating supply voltage of the I²C buffer.
2. Ensuring the voltage compliance of the 1.8V and 3.3V bus will not cause faulty operation of the I²C communication. The zener regulator must withstand the power supply variations of the 3.3V supply rail.
3. Providing protection on the 1.8V microcontroller against the potential overcurrent caused by the rise time accelerators on the buffer. A critical concern is the rise time accelerator from the I²C buffer damaging the 1.8V microcontroller. ESD diodes internal to the microcontroller are forward biased at ~0.5V above its supply rail. While the rise time accelerators drive the bus to 2.4V, they are active for only ~500ns (see Figure 2). If overcurrent is a concern, a series resistor on the I²C SDA (Data) and SCL (Clock) lines of 10Ω limits the current to protect the microcontroller. Assuming a worse cast 0V diode conduction, the peak current is limited by the capability of the rise time accelerator circuit on the buffer, in this case 5mA. From a voltage stand-point a 1.8V to 3.3V microcontroller has an absolute maximum voltage in the 3.6V range, much less than the 2.4V from the accelerator drive.

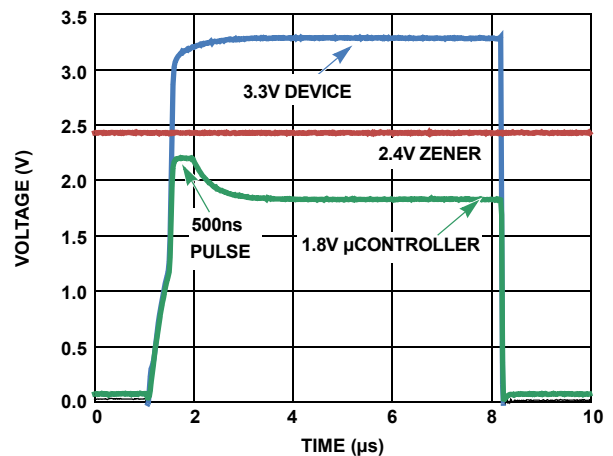


FIGURE 2. 1.8V TO 3.3V LEVEL SHIFTING

Another consideration when choosing the right buffer is that some devices similar to the ISL33002 and ISL33003 have a 2.7V minimum operating voltage. A 2.7V zener regulator is required, but the rise time accelerator over drive voltage is now 0.9V above the 1.8V rail, enough to fully turn on the ESD diode inside the microcontroller. The Intersil ISL33002 and ISL33003 I²C buffers with their lower minimum operating voltage of 2.3V allow a standard 2.4V zener diode regulator while reducing the rise time accelerator over drive voltage to the 1.8V microcontroller compared to competitor equivalent I²C buffers.

For applications that will use both 3.3V and 5V I²C devices in a mixed voltage bus system, the same application circuit will work. For direct level shifting between a 5V and 1.8V bus, the zener regulator will need a change to resistor R_F to limit the higher supply voltage. See Figure 3. However the best solution is to power the ISL33002/ISL33003 with 3.3V and zener regulate the second supply pin to 2.4V. I²C bus pull-up resistors to 1.8V on the microcontroller side and pull-up resistors to 5V on the slave side perform the logic level shifting while the buffer provides the isolation from each bus. See Figure 5. The ISL33002 and ISL33003 SDA/SCL pins are overvoltage compliant up to 5.5V regardless of the power supply level. In this circuit, the buffer actively drives the high voltage bus to 3.3V, then the pull-up resistors passively drive it to the 5V rail. See Figure 4. This allows all of the buffers on the board to be powered by a single supply instead, simplifying the design and layout.

For more information on ISL33002/ISL33003, including Intersil's family of I²C Buffer and other related products, visit intersil.com.

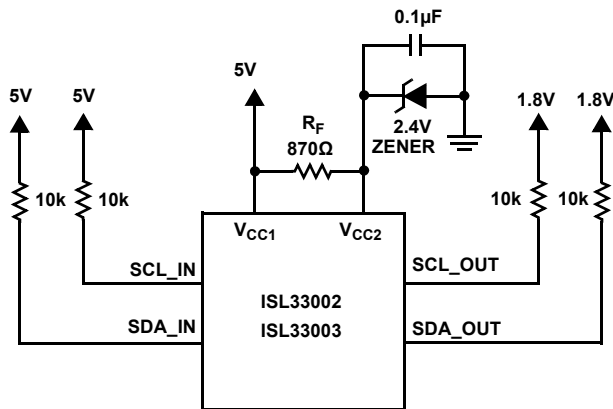


FIGURE 3. 1.8V TO 5V LEVEL SHIFTING WITH 5V SUPPLY

Related Literature

- See [FN7560](#), ISL33001, ISL33002, ISL33003 Datasheet, "I²C Bus Buffer with Rise Time Accelerators and Hot Swap Capability"
- See [FN6492](#), ISL3034E, ISL3035E, ISL3036E Datasheet, "4-Channel And 6-Channel High Speed, Auto-direction Sensing Logic Level Translators"
- See [AN1543](#), "ISL33001MSOPEVAL1Z, ISL33002MSOPEVAL1Z, ISL33003MSOPEVAL1Z Evaluation Board User's Manual"

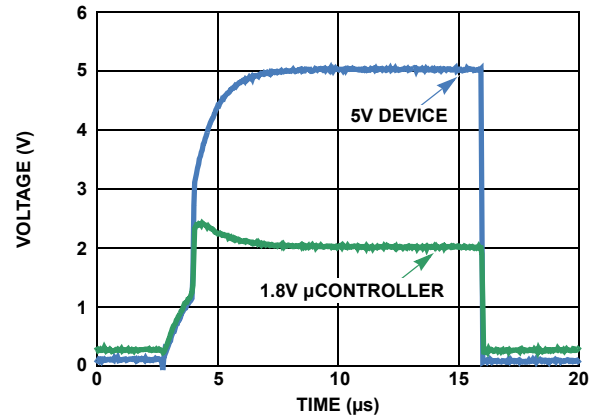


FIGURE 4. 1.8V TO 5V LEVEL SHIFTING WITH 3.3V SUPPLY

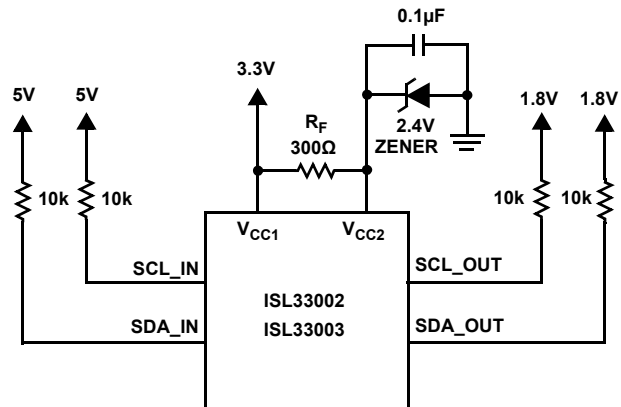


FIGURE 5. 1.8V TO 5V LEVEL SHIFTING WITH 3.3V SUPPLY

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(Rev.4.0-1 November 2017)



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Renesas Electronics America Inc.
1001 Murphy Ranch Road, Milpitas, CA 95035, U.S.A.
Tel: +1-408-432-8888, Fax: +1-408-434-5351

Renesas Electronics Canada Limited
9251 Yonge Street, Suite 8309 Richmond Hill, Ontario Canada L4C 9T3
Tel: +1-905-237-2004

Renesas Electronics Europe Limited
Dukes Meadow, Millboard Road, Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, SL8 5FH, U.K
Tel: +44-1628-651-700, Fax: +44-1628-651-804

Renesas Electronics Europe GmbH
Arcadiastrasse 10, 40472 Düsseldorf, Germany
Tel: +49-211-6503-0, Fax: +49-211-6503-1327

Renesas Electronics (China) Co., Ltd.
Room 1709 Quantum Plaza, No.27 ZhichunLu, Haidian District, Beijing, 100191 P. R. China
Tel: +86-10-8235-1155, Fax: +86-10-8235-7679

Renesas Electronics (Shanghai) Co., Ltd.
Unit 301, Tower A, Central Towers, 555 Langao Road, Putuo District, Shanghai, 200333 P. R. China
Tel: +86-21-2226-0888, Fax: +86-21-2226-0999

Renesas Electronics Hong Kong Limited
Unit 1601-1611, 16/F., Tower 2, Grand Century Place, 193 Prince Edward Road West, Mongkok, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Tel: +852-2265-6688, Fax: +852-2886-9022

Renesas Electronics Taiwan Co., Ltd.
13F, No. 363, Fu Shing North Road, Taipei 10543, Taiwan
Tel: +886-2-8175-9600, Fax: +886-2-8175-9670

Renesas Electronics Singapore Pte. Ltd.
80 Bendemeer Road, Unit #06-02 Hyflux Innovation Centre, Singapore 339949
Tel: +65-6213-0200, Fax: +65-6213-0300

Renesas Electronics Malaysia Sdn.Bhd.
Unit 1207, Block B, Menara Amcorp, Amcorp Trade Centre, No. 18, Jln Persiaran Barat, 46050 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
Tel: +60-3-7955-9390, Fax: +60-3-7955-9510

Renesas Electronics India Pvt. Ltd.
No.777C, 100 Feet Road, HAL 2nd Stage, Indiranagar, Bangalore 560 038, India
Tel: +91-80-67208700, Fax: +91-80-67208777

Renesas Electronics Korea Co., Ltd.
17F, KAMCO Yangjae Tower, 262, Gangnam-daero, Gangnam-gu, Seoul, 06265 Korea
Tel: +82-2-558-3737, Fax: +82-2-558-5338