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Constant Current from a Voltage Regulator

Ever needed a constant-current supply? Recently, I needed a constant-current source to test some incandescent lamps as radio-frequency broadband noise generators. Rather than design an elaborate circuit, I decided to try using a simple technique by which a constant-voltage regulator can supply a constant current.

If a fixed resistor is placed across the output of a three-terminal voltage regulator, the current drawn from the supply is independent of the supply voltage. Hence, if the regulator circuit with fixed load is placed in series with any device, the current through the device will be constant and equal to the regulator output voltage divided by the fixed load resistance. The circuit configuration is shown in Fig. 1.

The output current is set by R1. For a 5-volt regulator, the output current is: $I = 5/R1$.

The maximum output current cannot exceed the regulator's output current rating. Hence, with a standard 7805 or LM309K, R1 should not be smaller than 5 Ohms. The power dissipated by R1 is 25/R1. The wattage rating of the resistor should be at least twice this value. The voltage drop across the regulator is the supply voltage minus the load voltage and must not be permitted to fall below 7 volts. The supply voltage must therefore be greater than 7 volts plus the load voltage or: $V_S \geq 7 + R_L I_{reg.}$.

If the difference between the supply and load voltages drops to less than 7 volts, the current will no longer be constant but will decrease. This can be seen in Fig. 2, where the output current as a function of supply voltage for different load resistances is plotted.

One caution: Do not let the supply voltage exceed the input voltage rating of the regulator chip, which is usually 35 volts. Since I first tried this technique, the circuit also has been used to stabilize the current to a CW laser diode system where I work. ■

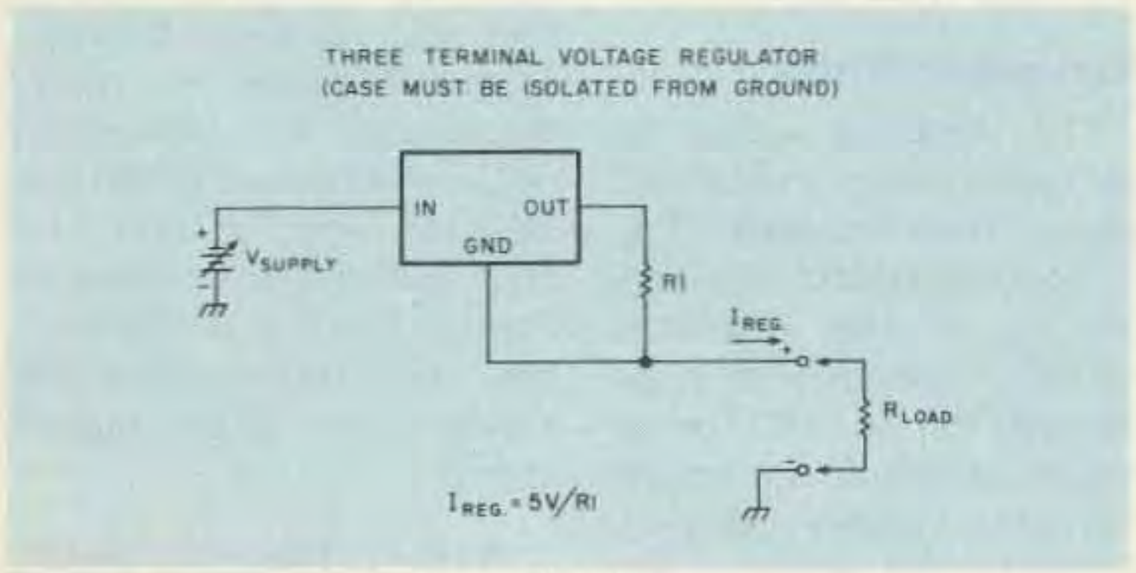

Fig. 1.

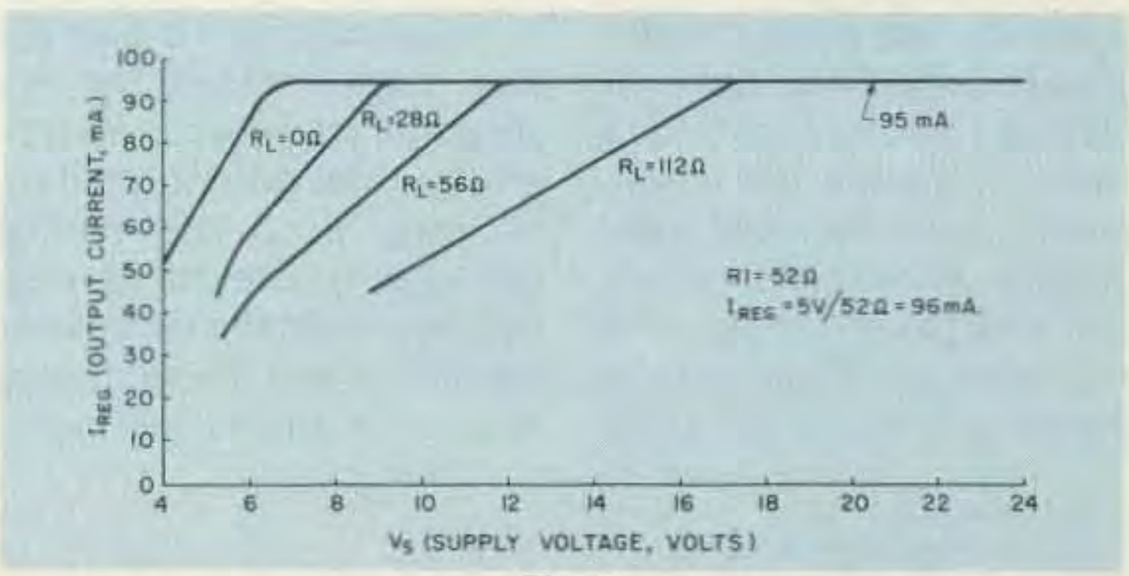

Fig. 2

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