23 A simple transistor tester

Introduction

Although transistors aren't used as much as they were before integrated circuits came along, a transistor tester is still a useful piece of test equipment to have around the shack. This design is about the simplest possible and will produce an indication of whether a transistor is giving any current gain; this does not necessarily mean that the transistor is perfect but that it is working to a certain extent. This tester will **not** test field-effect transistors (FETs). If you buy a bag of transistors at a rally, this tester is useful for giving a yes/no indication of which ones go straight in the bin and which are kept for further use.

How it works

Figure 1 shows the simple wiring circuit. In order to explain the working of the circuit, a circuit diagram is shown in **Figure 2**, with the npn transistor, TR1, under test shown as part of the circuit. The pnp/npn selector switch, SW1, is omitted for clarity.

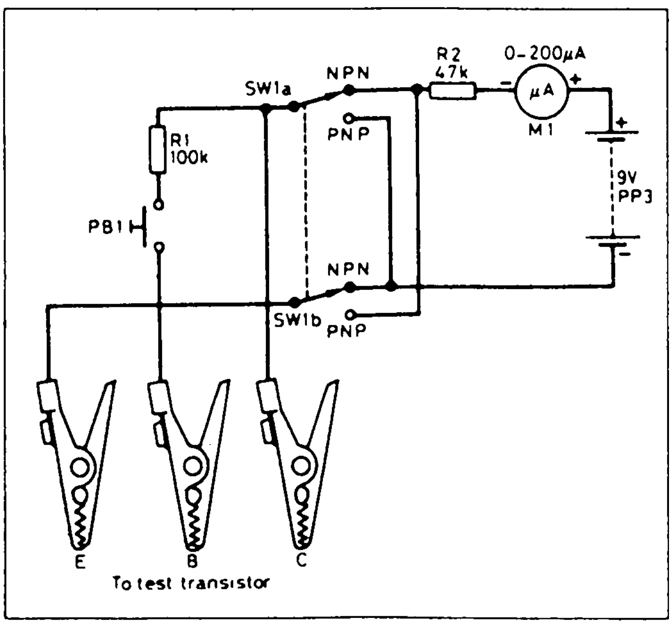

Figure 1 Circuit diagram of the transister tester

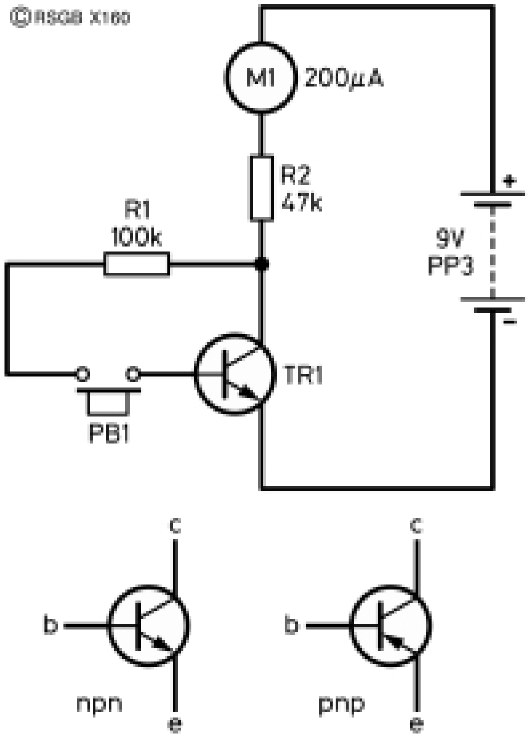

Figure 2 Testing an npn transistor

Any current that flows through the transistor, TR1, must flow from the battery, through the meter, M1, and through the protective resistor, R2. R2 prevents excessive current flowing through the meter and damaging it. Even if there is a short-circuit between emitter and collector, the maximum current that will flow is given by the simple equation

$$I = \frac{V}{R},$$

where I is the current flowing in amps,
V is the battery voltage, and
R is the total circuit resistance in ohms.

Putting in the correct values, gives

$$I = \frac{9}{47\ 000} = 0.000191 \text{ A, or 191 microamps } (\mu\text{A}).$$

The resistance of the meter, M1, will cut this down a little more, but it is within the indicating range (200 μA) of the meter.

As shown, with the push-button switch, PB1, *open*, a good transistor will not draw any current from the battery, and M1 will thus remain at zero. When PB1 is *pressed*, a *very small* current is injected into the base of the transistor. If the transistor is working, it will produce a much larger current between the collector and emitter, and this current will also flow through M1 and R2, giving a significant reading on M1, showing that all appears to be well. If an appreciable current flows when PB1 is *open*, then your transistor is suspect.

Don't be put off by the apparently complicated switch, SW1. It is there to allow the other type of transistor, the pnp type, to be tested. All it does is reverse the battery connections, so that the emitter goes to the *negative* battery terminal for testing an npn transistor, and to the positive terminal for a pnp type!

Most transistors in common use are of the npn type, which is why Figure 2 shows the testing of an npn type. The connections to the different transistor *encapsulations* (shapes) are given in any good component catalogue. Avoid the trial-and-error method to discover the connections to a transistor. This is unscientific, and can be very frustrating, particularly if the transistor is faulty in the first place!

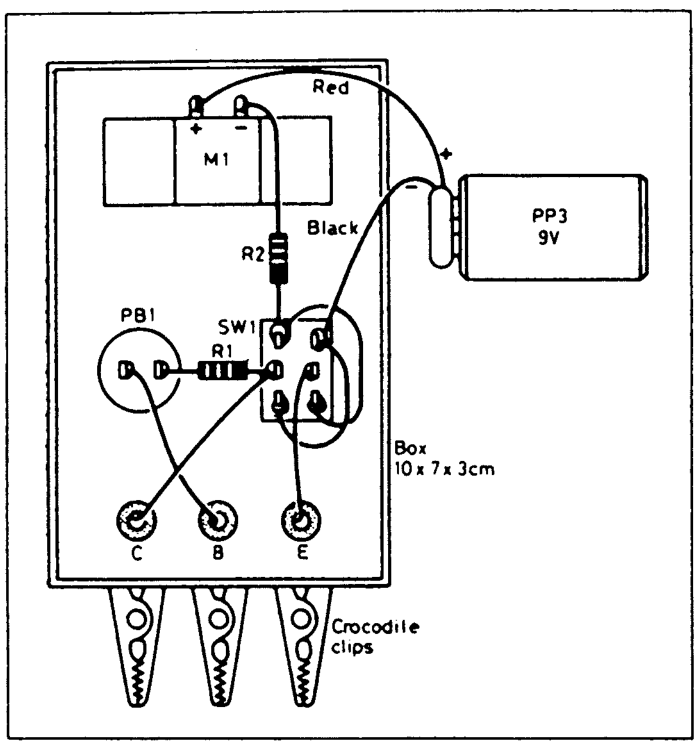

Figure 3 This shows how to wire up the tester

Construction

The unit can be built into a small plastic box, the components being soldered directly to the fixed terminals of the meter and the two switches; no circuit board is necessary! Use different colours of wire for the three test leads, and make sure you know which is which! Check the connections against the wiring diagram of **Figure 3**. When you are confident that all is correct, connect the battery and make sure there is no reading on the meter when nothing is connected to the crocodile clips!

Find any transistor for which you know the connections and the type (npn or pnp). Set the npn/pnp switch accordingly. Connect the three clips, making sure that they do not touch each other. A small reading on the meter at this stage means the transistor is suspect; a large reading means it is not working and should be thrown away! Press PB1 and watch the meter; a reading greater than half of full-scale indicates a good transistor. If it is less than half, you may have a transistor with 'low gain'; it may be usable for non-critical applications, but if you are in any doubt – throw it away!

Parts list

Resistors: all 0.25 watt, 5% tolerance

R1	100 kilohms (kΩ)
R2	47 kilohms (kΩ)

Additional items

PB1	Push-button switch
SW1	DPDT (double-pole double-throw) switch
M1	Micro-ammeter – *not* less than 200 μA full-scale deflection
	Crocodile clips (3 needed)
	PP3 battery and connector
	Plastic box about 10 × 7 × 3 cm

Common types of transistor

BC108, BC109, 2N2369A

These are small-signal npn types, used in audio amplifiers. They are in metal cases (called TO18) and have a tab next to the emitter lead. Common types have a B or C suffix (e.g. BC109C). The C suffix indicates a higher current gain than those with a B suffix. The 2N2369A is specially designed for radio use at high frequencies.

2N3703, BC212L, BCY71

These are pnp transistors, and so must be used with the collector and base *negative* with respect to the emitter. These three types are used in small amplifiers and audio oscillators. The first two have plastic encapsulations (TO92), while the BCY71 has a metal case (TO18).

BFY50, BFY51, BFY52

For slightly higher powers, these are ideal. They have been used in novice transmitters up to 600 milliwatts (mW). The TO5 case is a scaled-up version of the TO18 case. They are all npn types.

2N3055, 2N3773, TIP35C

These are high-power transistors in bigger encapsulations. The thick metal TO3 case of the 2N3055 and 2N3773 is designed to bolt to a heat sink, a large piece of metal which conducts the heat into the air more rapidly than the transistor itself can. The TIP35C is made of plastic but has a thick metal tab by which it, too, can be bolted to a heat sink.