

# ANALOG COMPUTER

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November 8, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *ANALOG COMPUTER*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=65712>

## ANALOG COMPUTER

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Computing Science, Systems Engineering, Applied Mathematics, Electrical Engineering

### 1. Core Definition and Operational Principles

An analog computer is a type of computing device that solves problems by utilizing a physical analogue of the mathematical relationships inherent in the problem structure. Unlike a digital computer, which operates on discrete numerical data (typically binary 0s and 1s), the analog computer represents computational factors--such as numbers, variables, and constants--through continuously variable physical quantities. These quantities can manifest as the rotating of a shaft, variations in electrical voltage or current, fluid pressure, or mechanical displacements. The computer's toolbox comprises components designed to perform mathematical operations (like integration, differentiation, addition, and scaling) by manipulating these physical analogues.

The central operational principle relies on the mapping between the physical system used by the computer and the system being modeled. For instance, a complex set of differential equations governing the trajectory of a missile might be mapped onto a network of operational amplifiers and resistors where voltage levels correspond directly to velocities and distances. By applying an input voltage representing the initial conditions, the system dynamically changes according to the configured component relationships, and the resulting output voltage provides the solution to the equations in real-time. This intrinsic parallelism, derived from the direct physical modeling, allows analog computers to achieve extremely fast computation speeds for dynamic systems.

### 2. Representation of Data (The Analog Principle)

The fundamental difference between analog and digital computation lies in their data representation. In analog systems, information is encoded continuously. If a variable in a calculation ranges from zero to ten, it might be represented by a voltage ranging from zero to ten volts. Crucially, any value between zero and ten (e.g., 5.345 V or 5.3451 V) is theoretically representable, limited only by the precision of the physical measurement instruments. This contrasts sharply with digital systems, which must quantize or round these continuous values into a finite set of discrete states.

This continuous representation allows the analog computer to handle complex mathematical functions, particularly those involving rates of change, with great fidelity. The physical processes within the computer--such as the decay rate of a capacitor or the rotation rate of a gear--naturally obey the laws of physics, which often correspond directly to the mathematical laws (like integration) required by the problem. This means the computer is not simulating a continuous process using discrete steps (as a digital computer must); rather, it is executing the continuous

process directly.

### 3. Historical Precursors and Early Mechanisms

The history of analog computation stretches back millennia, far preceding the advent of electronic technology. Early examples include ancient mechanisms designed to track astronomical movements. The most famous example is the Antikythera Mechanism, an intricate Greek device dating to the 2nd century BCE, which used a complex system of gears to predict celestial positions and eclipses. While crude compared to modern devices, it embodied the core analog principle of using physical mechanisms to model mathematical relationships.

In the modern era, mechanical analog calculation gained significant traction in the 17th to 19th centuries with devices such as slide rules, planimeters, and tide-predicting machines. These tools facilitated rapid, though limited, scientific calculations. The culmination of mechanical analog design was the Differential Analyzer, developed by **Vannevar Bush** at MIT in the 1930s. This machine, employing interconnected mechanical integrators (wheel-and-disc mechanisms), was capable of solving complex ordinary differential equations, making it the most powerful general-purpose computational device of its time, crucial for ballistics and power system analysis.

### 4. The Rise of Electronic Analog Computation

The transition from mechanical to electronic analog computers (EACs) occurred largely during and after World War II. Electronic components, particularly operational amplifiers (op-amps), provided higher precision, greater flexibility, and vastly increased speed over their mechanical predecessors. An op-amp circuit could be configured to perform addition, subtraction, multiplication, and, most critically, integration and differentiation, purely through manipulation of voltages.

Electronic analog computers became indispensable tools in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly within the aerospace and defense industries. They were instrumental in designing and testing complex control systems, simulating the dynamics of aircraft flight, and calculating missile trajectories in real-time. Programming an EAC involved physically connecting components on a removable patch panel, linking integrators, summers, and potentiometers (used for scaling constants) according to the structure of the differential equations being solved.

### 5. Key Characteristics and Advantages

The advantages of analog computation are specific and powerful, particularly when dealing with systems defined by continuous processes.

**Real-Time Operation:** Analog computers process all components of the system simultaneously (in

parallel), meaning the solution is generated as quickly as the physical dynamics of the electronic circuit allow. This capability made them ideal for real-time simulations and hardware-in-the-loop testing, where digital computers of the era were often too slow.

**Direct Modeling:** They offer a powerful intuition because the physical structure of the computer circuit often directly mirrors the physical structure of the system being studied (e.g., a chemical reaction or a structural vibration).

**Cost Efficiency (Historically):** For specific tasks, such as solving boundary-value problems or linear differential equations, a dedicated analog machine could be built or purchased far more cheaply than the mainframe digital computers required to perform the same calculations.

Furthermore, analog computers are often considered "large calculators used for computing a variety of factors, not always, but often of an arithmetic nature," indicating their versatility in handling mathematical relationships beyond simple arithmetic, focusing instead on dynamic mathematical operations like calculus.

## 6. Limitations and Precision Issues

Despite their speed, analog computers suffer from inherent limitations that ultimately led to their replacement by digital systems. The primary drawback is **precision**. Since the solution is represented by a physical measurement (like a voltage reading), the accuracy is inherently constrained by the stability of the components, electrical noise, and the precision of the measuring instrument (e.g., an oscilloscope or voltmeter). Typically, analog computers rarely achieved accuracy beyond three or four significant digits, whereas digital systems can extend precision virtually infinitely.

Another significant limitation is **scalability and programmability**. Making a calculation more precise or solving a larger, more complex problem required physically adding more components (op-amps, resistors, potentiometers) and re-wiring the patch panel. This made setup and modification cumbersome and time-consuming. In contrast, digital computers offer massive flexibility, allowing completely different problems to be solved merely by loading new software instructions.

## 7. Applications in Dynamic Systems Modeling

Analog computers excelled in fields requiring the solution of complex, coupled differential equations, particularly those representing real-world dynamic processes.

**Aerospace and Ballistics:** Used extensively for real-time simulation of aircraft control systems and the calculation of missile trajectories, where instantaneous feedback was essential.

**Process Control:** Applied in chemical engineering and nuclear power generation to model heat transfer, fluid flow, and reaction dynamics, aiding in the design of robust feedback control systems.

**Research and Education:** Served as excellent tools for teaching control theory and dynamic system behavior, allowing students to observe immediate changes in the system output as parameters were adjusted.

While purely electronic analog computers are largely obsolete today, displaced by the speed, precision, and flexibility of modern digital processors, hybrid computers--which combine the fast integration capabilities of analog components with the logical control and memory of digital systems--were developed and saw limited use, paving the way for specialized digital signal processors (DSPs) which now handle many of the same tasks.

### Further Reading

[Analog computer - Wikipedia](#)

[Analog Computer - Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

[How the Analog Computer Lost the Race - Computer History Museum](#)

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