

# Grounded systems in mission-critical installations

## Abstract

Many factors must be considered when designing the electrical system for critical facilities, especially the type of ground system used. Proper grounding reduces overvoltages, improves uptime, and isolates faults.

## Introduction

Grounded systems offer many benefits over ungrounded systems [1][2][3]. When properly applied, high resistance grounding (HRG) is a specialized type of grounding that offers unique benefits in mission-critical installations.

## Grounded system types

Because a properly grounded system is important, the question becomes "What type of ground system should be installed?" While many variations exist, the most common types of grounding systems are:

- Ungrounded
- Corner grounded delta (CGD)
- Solidly (or effectively) grounded
- Low resistance grounded (LRG)
- High resistance grounded (HRG)
- Resonant grounded
- Hybrid high resistance grounded (HHRG)

## Ungrounded

Although once a common solution, ungrounded systems have several problems and are not recommended for most modern electrical systems [4].

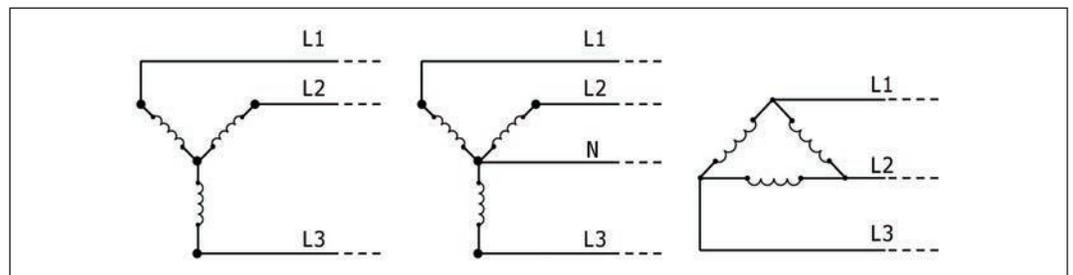


Figure 1. Representative three- and four-wire ungrounded wye and ungrounded delta systems

**Corner grounded delta (CGD)**

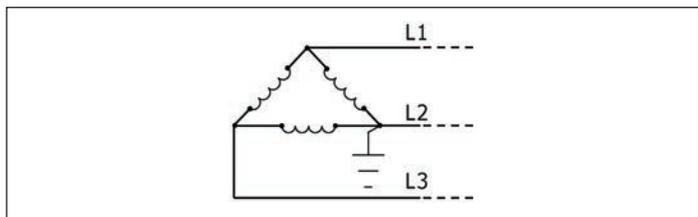
As the disadvantages of ungrounded systems became better known, a simple, low-cost method of establishing a ground reference on an ungrounded delta system was sought.

**Advantages of CGD:**

- Establishes a ground reference for each current carry conductor
- Low cost
- Eliminates the problems (overvoltages, transients) of an ungrounded system

**Disadvantages of CGD:**

- Need to mark grounded phase throughout distribution system
- Cannot use lower-cost “slash-rated” circuit breakers (e.g., 480/277 or 240/120)
- Ground fault sensing is undefined for the grounded phase, so typically cannot be used at locations where ground faults are required, such as healthcare facilities

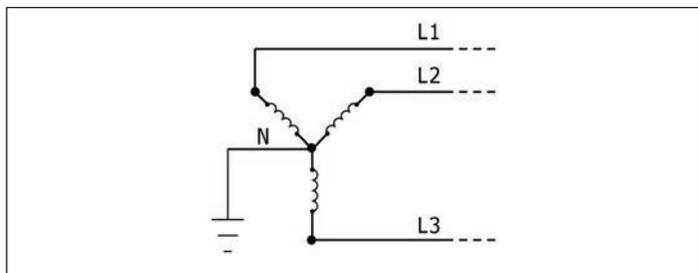


**Figure 2. Corner grounded delta**

**Solidly (effectively) grounded (LRG)**

Solidly (or effectively) grounded systems connect (bond) the system neutral directly to earth ground. This helps ensure that the neutral voltage is essentially equal to ground ①. With a grounded neutral, each individual phase (or line) to neutral voltage is fixed with a reference to ground.

Because of this fixed reference, solidly grounded systems help ensure that phase-to-ground overvoltages do not occur. Properly installed solidly grounded systems will bond the neutral ground at only one point. Failing to pay attention to the location of neutral-to-ground bond points can disrupt ground fault sensing systems. Also, the large amounts of current that can flow during a ground fault on such a system require that the source be disconnected immediately upon the detection of a ground fault. This reduces system reliability and load availability compared to other grounding methods. Because ground faults are 100 times more common than any other type of fault [8][9], having such a vulnerable design may not be the best choice for mission-critical applications.



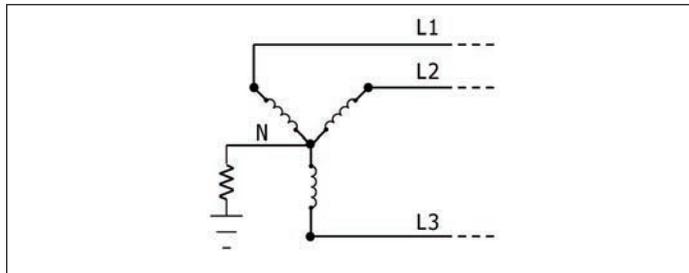
**Figure 3. Solidly grounded system**

① Offset by any voltage drop flowing through the N-G conductor due to ground fault current that may be flowing at the time.

② These restrictions are discussed in Appendix B of this document.

**Low resistance grounded (LRG)**

Low resistance grounding is used to reduce damage caused by high currents flowing during ground faults. Although more common on medium-voltage systems, they can also be used on low-voltage systems. Even though current is reduced (hundreds of amperes versus thousands), the fault current magnitude is still sufficiently large enough that the source must be disconnected immediately. As a result, unless there are overriding reasons as with the solidly grounded, a low resistance grounded system may not be the first choice for mission-critical applications.



**Figure 4. Resistance grounded system (low and high resistance)**

**High resistance grounded (HRG)**

High resistance grounded systems are similar to low resistance grounded systems, except that a neutral grounding resistor with a higher resistance is chosen. This reduces the ground fault current to even lower values, typically less than 10 A, and frequently less than 5 A on low-voltage systems. Such small currents eliminate the need to trip immediately, allowing time to locate and clear the ground fault. Also, HRG systems can include features that assist in locating the ground fault, which speeds repairs and improves safety and reliability. Therefore, in certain applications, HRG systems are recommended for mission-critical applications.

One issue, however, is that while a ground remains in the system, the neutral voltage will rise to above ground potential. Some UPSs will view a neutral-to-ground voltage as a fault and inhibit transferring to and from bypass. For this reason, HRG systems may not be recommended for powering UPSs or other information and communication technology (ICT) loads. With an HRG system, the system designer will need to weigh the benefits of increased power availability into the UPS (due to GFs not causing a source trip) with the potential problems resulting when certain UPSs switch to bypass while a GF is present.

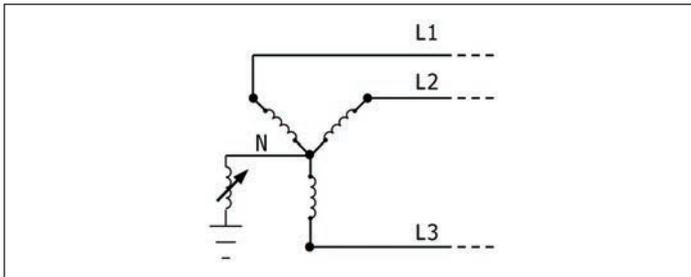
Nevertheless, in all cases, HRG systems still can be configured to trip the upstream breaker, effectively mimicking a solidly grounded system while also providing the extra benefit of reduced arc flash incident energy releasing during a single GF event because the neutral resistance limits the GF current to very modest levels.

While ground faults can occur anywhere, a somewhat more common location in data centers is within motors. The thinness of the winding insulation, the proximity of the winding to the stator, the high (and cycling) temperatures, and the (likewise cyclic) vibrations all stress the windings and create an environment conducive to ground faults.

Having a grounding system like an HRG system would be desirable for mission-critical applications. However, besides the UPS issue mentioned above, the United States National Electrical Code (NEC®) and the Canadian Electrical Code (CEC) place additional restrictions on situations when HRG systems can be used ②. However, these restrictions tend to not apply to motor loads. In mission-critical installations, larger motors are rarely connected line-to-neutral (one of the code prohibitions when using HRG). This means that mission-critical sites could use HRG on the mechanical loads while using a solidly grounded system to power the ICT loads.

**Resonant grounded**

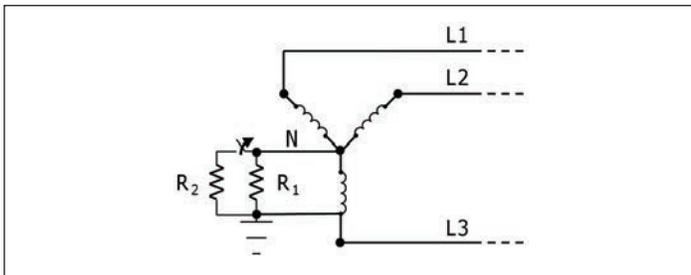
A less common grounding scheme is known as resonant grounding. Resonant grounded systems are grounded through a variable inductance called a Petersen coil. The coil is in series with the effective line-to-ground capacitance of each phase conductor and is tuned to produce an impedance based on the series LC circuit. Because the Petersen coil is adjusted based on what is connected at the time, the disadvantage of this design is that the Petersen coil would potentially need to be re-adjusted as different loads are switched on and off.



**Figure 5. Resonant grounded system**

**Hybrid high resistance grounded (HHRG)**

Hybrid high resistance systems were developed for the special case of protecting generators from internal ground faults [5]. They operate as a low resistance grounded system with a bypass device closed under normal conditions. When a fault is detected, the bypass device opens and ground current is forced through a second, higher resistance value resistor. This reduces the current and also the likelihood of internal generator lamination damage.



**Figure 6. Hybrid high resistance grounded system**

**Table 1. Overvoltage and continuity benefits of grounding options**

Description	Protection against overvoltages	Operation during fault	Ability to locate fault
Ungrounded	No	Yes	Limited ①
Solidly grounded	Yes	No	No
Low resistance grounded	Yes	No	No
High resistance grounded	Yes	Yes	Yes

① Loads can be selectively switched off while simultaneously monitoring voltage line to ground. When the feeder with the ground is switched off, the line-to-ground voltage jumps to a higher value. However, this is a very intrusive method of troubleshooting because it requires disconnecting loads.

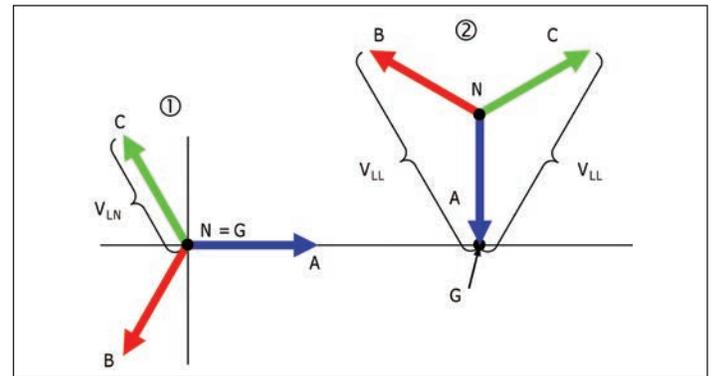
As shown in **Table 1**, only the HRG system provides protection against overvoltages, while also providing high service continuity and the ability to locate a fault—all attractive features for mission-critical environments.

HRG systems, however, must be installed per Article 250.36 of the NEC, which limits the use of HRG to only three-phase installations where:

- No line-to-neutral loads are connected
- Ground detectors are installed
- Only qualified persons service the installation
- Continuity of service is required

As mentioned earlier, this means that HRG systems cannot be used on three-phase, four-wire systems where line-to-neutral loads are connected. Because many commercial building distribution systems are three-phase, four-wire, loads are commonly connected between a line and neutral (e.g., 277 fluorescent lighting connected to a 480Y/277 three-phase, four-wire system). In such a system, the NEC would prohibit using an HRG system.

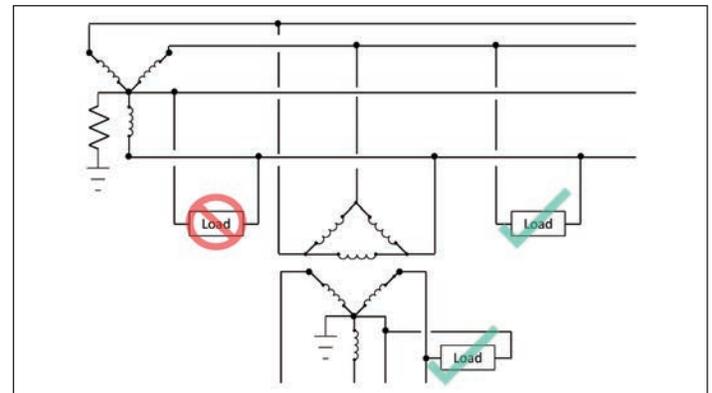
The principal reason for the prohibition is that during a ground fault, the neutral conductor in an HRG system is no longer at ground potential. The line-to-ground voltage increases on the ungrounded phases to a value equal to the previous line-to-neutral voltage multiplied by  $\sqrt{3}$ . In some cases, this can stress overvoltage protective devices.



**Figure 7. Grounding a phase in HRG system causes line-to-ground voltage to increase by  $\sqrt{3}$**

Most likely, the NEC code-making panel did not want to verify if the myriad of electrical devices that might possibly connect to the neutral conductor could tolerate a raised voltage, so the code makes a blanket prohibition of the use of line-to-neutral loads on HRG systems.

However, for three-phase, three-wire systems there are, by definition, no loads connected to neutral connections. In this case, HRG provides service continuity while simultaneously offering protection against transient overvoltages.



**Figure 8. Acceptable and unacceptable single-phase loads on HRG system per NEC/CEC**

### Installing HRG systems

HRG can be installed either as part of a new installation or as a retrofit. HRG solutions can also be installed on systems fed by either wye or delta transformer secondaries.

Note that regardless of the type of connection, all HRG systems must have ground detectors per NEC 250.36. For this reason, manufacturers typically package the grounding resistor and detection systems into a single, easy-to-install package.

#### Source transformer—delta connected secondary

Because a delta transformer winding has no neutral bushing, the recommended method of grounding a delta transformer is to first derive the neutral and then ground that derived neutral through a resistor.

Because the maximum amount of neutral current is limited by the resistor chosen, the size of the transformer used to derive that neutral must only be large enough to provide the maximum fault current (typically 5 A or 10 A) at the rated line-to-neutral voltage (e.g., 277 V). The resistor is chosen to permit slightly more than system charging current to flow during a ground. Refer to [1] for a discussion of system charging current. For most low-voltage systems, system charging current will be no more than 1–2 A.

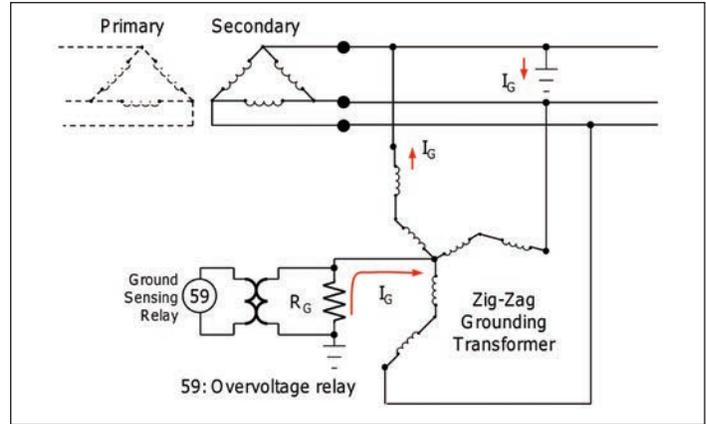


Figure 11. Derived neutral using a zig-zag transformer

#### Source transformer—wye connected secondary

Because a neutral bushing exists on a wye secondary, adding HRG is as shown in Figure 12.

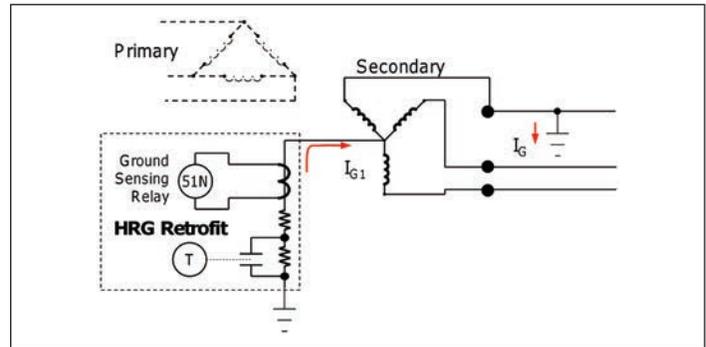


Figure 12. HRG with wye connected secondary

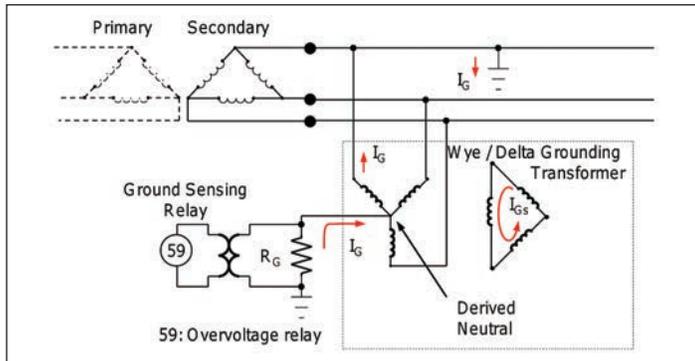


Figure 9. Derived neutral using a wye-delta transformer

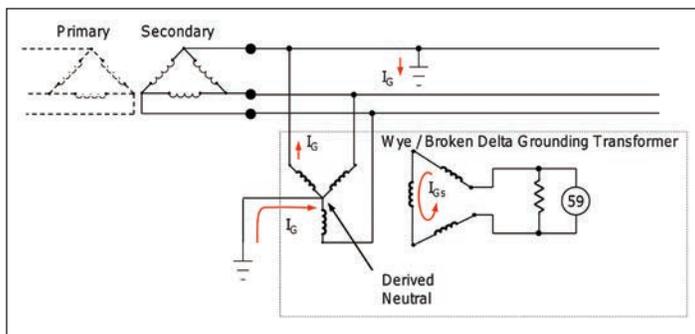


Figure 10. Derived neutral using a wye-broken delta transformer

#### Fault location—pulsing grounding

HRG systems, per the NEC, must include a method for detecting the presence of a ground fault. However, HRG systems can also be provided with an optional but recommended feature that helps locate the fault. This method, called a pulsing ground system, is one of the key features that differentiates the HRG system from all other grounding systems.

A pulsing ground system works as follows:

1. Once a fault is detected, an alarm is triggered (e.g., contact closure to PLC, DCS, BMS, horn, light).
2. Operator switches the HRG system into “pulse” mode to begin the fault locating process.
  - a. HRG activates a timer that selectively shorts out part of the grounding resistor.
  - b. Ground current increases to roughly twice the original value (e.g., 5 A – 10 A).
  - c. After 1–2 seconds, HRG timer times out and the resistor bypass is removed.
  - d. Ground current then decreases (e.g., 10 A – 5 A).
  - e. Process repeats to “a” until operator locates fault (step 3) and switches system out of pulse mode.

3. Operator places a clamp-on ammeter over all current-carrying conductors (even if enclosed in conduit) starting from the source out to each load.
  - a. If the ammeter is clamped between the source and the fault, the pulsing will be visible.
  - b. If the ammeter is clamped on a feeder without a ground fault, pulsing will not be visible.

A clamp-on ammeter with a sufficiently large current transformer (CT) window diameter to fit over any conduit can be used to detect this pulsing current. In the case of a ground fault, the current flowing through the conductors will not sum to zero; this difference will be displayed on the meter.

Because the current is very low (about 5 A), the pulsing system makes the ground current more visible against ordinary background current that might be displayed due to position of the CT relative to other current-carrying conductors.

The “heartbeat” pulse stands out from other noise signals that might be present.

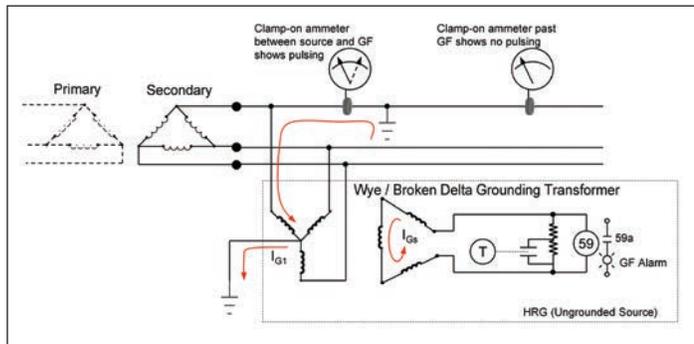


Figure 13. Clamp-on ammeter can be used to detect location of a fault

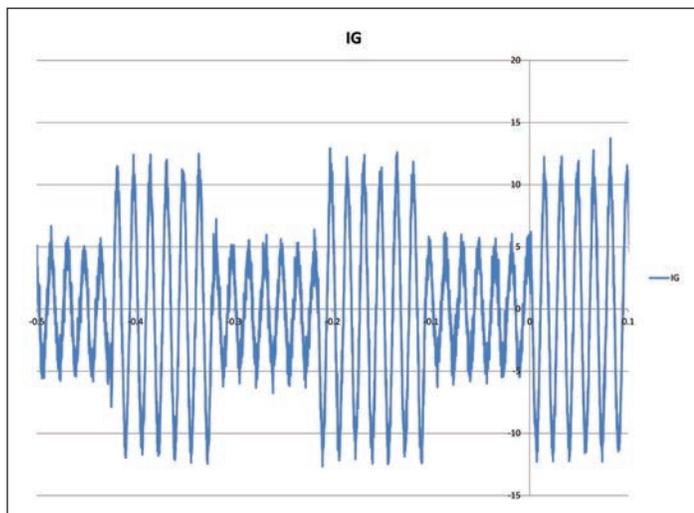


Figure 14. Power Xpert™ snapshot of ground current waveform “heartbeat” after HRG “pulsing” is activated

For more information on pulsing ground detection systems, refer to references [6] and [7].

**Multiple sources / multiple grounds**

As described earlier, the NEC/CEC require a ground fault detection system on all HRG systems. Multiple sources (especially those that can be paralleled, such as M-T-M systems) and systems with multiple ground sources complicate ground fault sensing [11].

Eaton’s Consulting Application Guide (CAG) describes various schemes for detecting the location of ground faults in systems with multiple sources (Figure 15 and Figure 16). Those sources may or may not be grounded.

However, one type of system requiring extra scrutiny is a system with multiple sources, each separately grounded and each paralleled to another. For such a system, a DGFS is recommended.

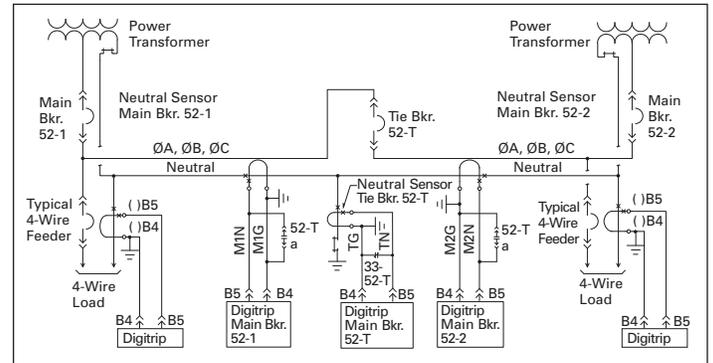


Figure 15. Dual source system—single point grounding

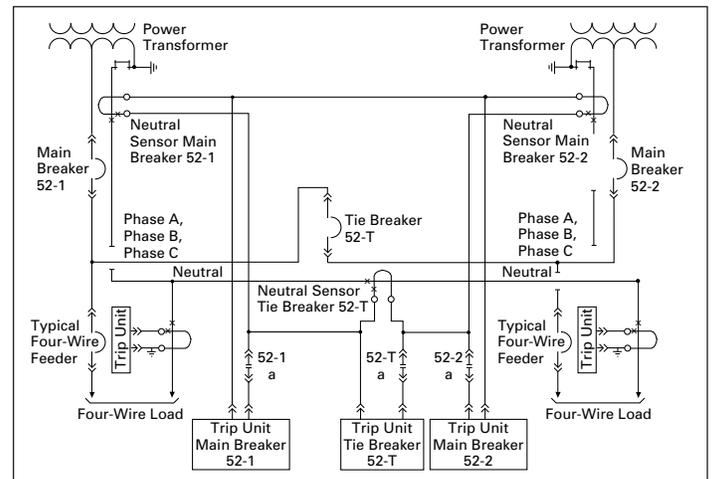


Figure 16. Dual source system—multiple point grounding

**Differential ground fault system (DGFS)**

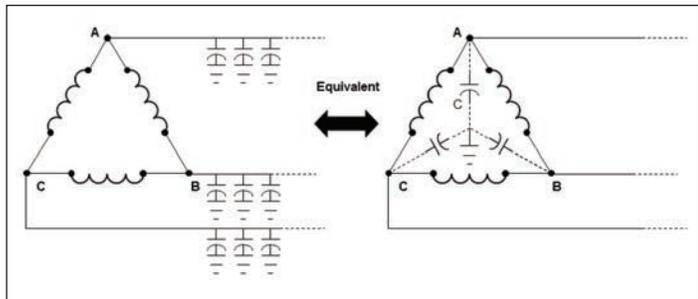
A DGFS [11] system uses signals from multiple sensors and connects those sensors in a differential or bridge scheme. The purpose of the differential connection is to measure the difference of current flowing into or out of a zone and only trip when the fault exists within that zone.

### Appendix A—ungrounded systems

While a complete study of grounding [1][2][3] is beyond the scope of this document, proper grounding can be summarized in the following “rules of thumb”:

1. No loads should be connected to ungrounded sources.
2. The type of ground (solid, low resistance, high resistance, resonant, or hybrid) varies with the type of system needed.

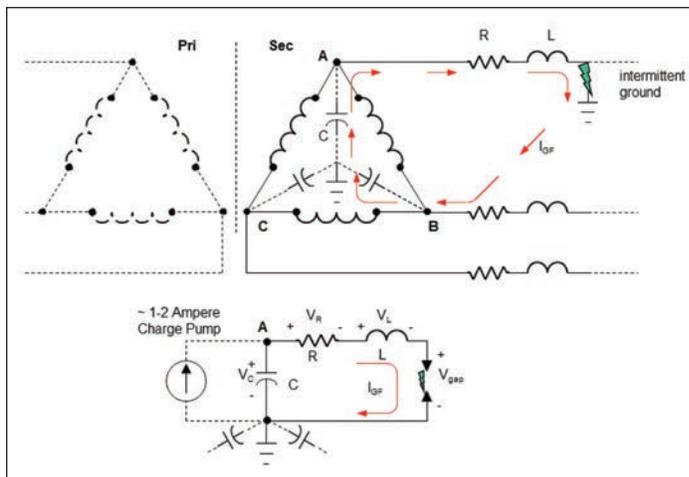
Although the term “ungrounded” is used, at least as early as the 1950s, power systems engineers have recognized that there is no such thing as an ungrounded alternating current source. Even sources with no intentional ground connection are actually grounded through system line-to-ground capacitance.



**Figure 17. Naturally occurring line-to-ground capacitance in “ungrounded” system**

The problem with such a system is that while the voltage across this line-to-ground capacitance can be nominally line-to-line voltage divided by 1.732, in actual systems it may not. Because these capacitors are unknown, this voltage is unknown, and as such, can be (and frequently is) much higher than expected.

To understand why, an analysis of the equivalent circuit of a single-phase reveals that these capacitors are charged by the line-to-line voltage and can be discharged by a single-phase ground fault. When that capacitor is discharged, the current flows through a series LC circuit. An equivalent circuit is shown in **Figure 18**.



**Figure 18. Intermittent ground fault creates a series LC system that can produce substantial overvoltages**

If the additional criterion is added that this ground fault is intermittent, the current flowing through the system inductance is interrupted. Because the voltage across an inductor is proportional to the rate of change of current flow, the voltage generated across this inductance can be arbitrarily large. Using Kirchhoff equations, notice that this voltage is able to “charge” the line-to-ground capacitance. Therefore, because this inductance value can be high, the resulting line-to-neutral voltage levels can be very high [4] as well.

For these and other reasons, ungrounded systems are rarely used today.

### Appendix B—NFPA® 70 (National Electrical Code) HRG restrictions

NEC Article 250.36 places restrictions on when HRG systems can be implemented. In particular, high resistance grounding cannot be used on systems unless the following conditions are met:

1. The conditions of maintenance and supervision ensure that only qualified persons service the installation.
2. Ground detectors are installed on the system.
3. Line-to-neutral loads are not served.

## References

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