

## An Introduction to DRAM

Dynamic random access memory (DRAM) integrated circuits (ICs) have existed for more than twenty-five years. DRAMs evolved from the earliest 1-kilobit (Kb) generation to the recent 1-gigabit (Gb) generation through advances in both semiconductor process and circuit design technology. Tremendous advances in process technology have dramatically reduced feature size, permitting ever higher levels of integration. These increases in integration have been accompanied by major improvements in component yield to ensure that overall process solutions remain cost-effective and competitive. Technology improvements, however, are not limited to semiconductor processing. Many of the advances in process technology have been accompanied or enabled by advances in circuit design technology. In most cases, advances in one have enabled advances in the other. In this chapter, we introduce some fundamentals of the DRAM IC, assuming that the reader has a basic background in complementary metal-oxide semiconductor (CMOS) circuit design, layout, and simulation [1].

### 1.1 DRAM TYPES AND OPERATION

To gain insight into how modern DRAM chips are designed, it is useful to look into the evolution of DRAM. In this section, we offer an overview of DRAM types and modes of operation.

#### 1.1.1 The 1k DRAM (First Generation)

We begin our discussion by looking at the 1,024-bit DRAM (1,024 x 1 bit). Functional diagrams and pin connections appear in Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2, respectively. Note that there are 10 address inputs with pin labels  $R_1$ – $R_5$  and  $C_1$ – $C_5$ . Each address input is connected to an on-chip address input buffer. The input buffers that drive the *row* ( $R$ ) and *column*

(C) decoders in the block diagram have two purposes: to provide a known *input capacitance* ( $C_{IN}$ ) on the address input pins and to detect the input address signal at a known level so as to reduce timing errors. The level  $V_{TRIP}$ , an idealized trip point around which the input buffers slice the input signals, is important due to the finite transition times on the chip inputs (Figure 1.3). Ideally, to avoid distorting the duration of the logic zeros and ones,  $V_{TRIP}$  should be positioned at a known level relative to the maximum and minimum input signal amplitudes. In other words, the reference level should change with changes in temperature, process conditions, *input maximum amplitude* ( $V_{IH}$ ), and *input minimum amplitude* ( $V_{IL}$ ). Having said this, we note that the input buffers used in first-generation DRAMs were simply inverters.

Continuing our discussion of the block diagram shown in Figure 1.1, we see that five address inputs are connected through a decoder to the 1,024-bit memory array in both the row and column directions. The total number of addresses in each direction, resulting from decoding the 5-bit word, is 32. The single memory array is made up of 1,024 memory elements laid out in a square of 32 rows and 32 columns. Figure 1.4 illustrates the conceptual layout of this memory array. A memory element is located at the intersection of a row and a column.

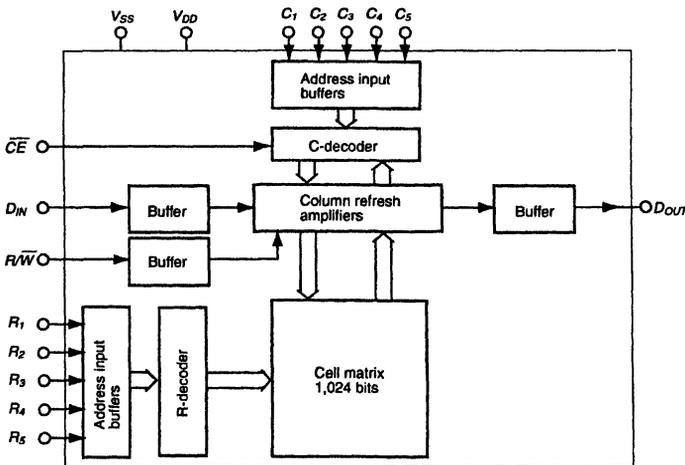


Figure 1.1 1,024-bit DRAM functional diagram.

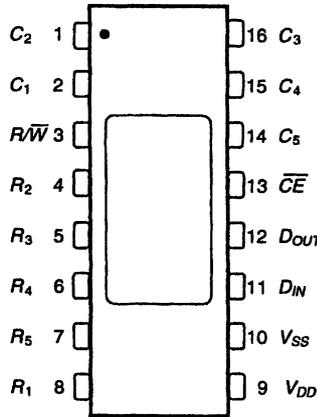


Figure 1.2 1,024-bit DRAM pin connections.

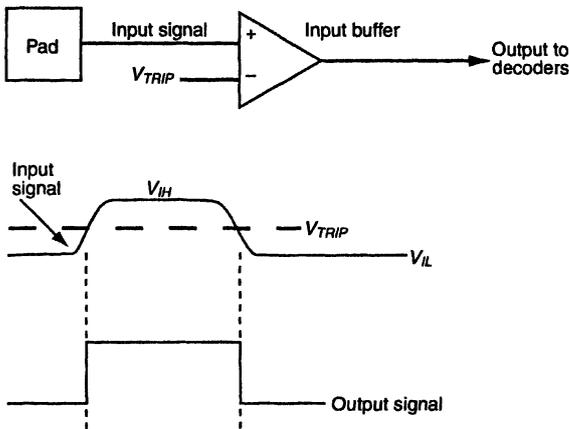


Figure 1.3 Ideal address input buffer.

By applying an address of all zeros to the 10 address input pins, the memory data located at the intersection of row0,  $RA_0$ , and column 0,  $CA_0$ , is accessed. (It is either written to or read out, depending on the state of the  $R/\overline{W}$  input and assuming that the  $\overline{CE}$  pin is LOW so that the chip is enabled.)

It is important to realize that a single bit of memory is accessed by using both a row and a column address. Modern DRAM chips reduce the number of external pins required for the memory address by using the same pins for

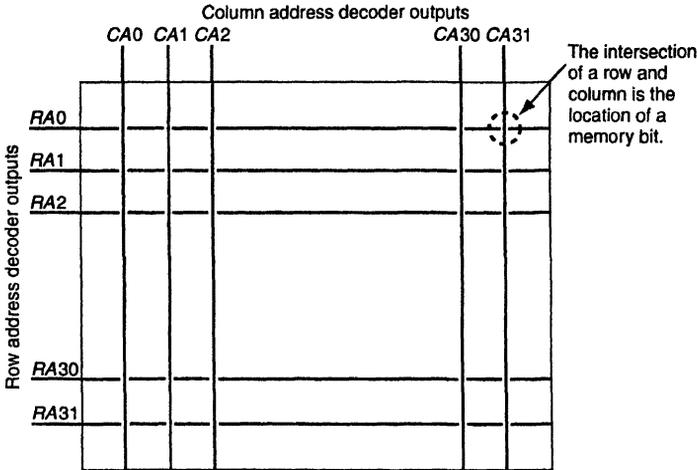


Figure 1.4 Layout of a 1,024-bit memory array.

both the row and column address inputs (*address multiplexing*). A clock signal *row address strobe* ( $\overline{RAS}$ ) strobes in a row address and then, on the same set of address pins, a clock signal *column address strobe* ( $\overline{CAS}$ ) strobes in a column address at a different time.

Also note how a first-generation memory array is organized as a logical square of memory elements. (At this point, we don't know what or how the memory elements are made. We just know that there is a circuit at the intersection of a row and column that stores a single bit of data.) In a modern DRAM chip, many smaller memory arrays are organized to achieve a larger memory size. For example, 1,024 smaller memory arrays, each composed of 256 kbits, may constitute a 256-Meg (256 million bits) DRAM.

**1.1.1.1 Reading Data Out of the 1k DRAM.** Data can be read out of the DRAM by first putting the chip in the Read mode by pulling the  $R/\overline{W}$  pin HIGH and then placing the chip enable pin  $\overline{CE}$  in the LOW state. Figure 1.5 illustrates the timing relationships between changes in the address inputs and data appearing on the  $D_{OUT}$  pin. Important timing specifications present in this figure are *Read cycle time* ( $t_{RC}$ ) and *Access time* ( $t_{AC}$ ). The term  $t_{RC}$  specifies how fast the memory can be read. If  $t_{RC}$  is 500 ns, then the DRAM can supply 1-bit words at a rate of 2 MHz. The term  $t_{AC}$  speci-

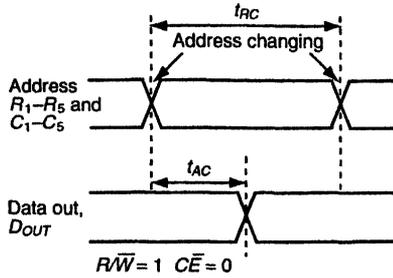


Figure 1.5 1k DRAM Read cycle.

fies the maximum length of time after the input address is changed before the output data ( $D_{OUT}$ ) is valid.

**1.1.1.2 Writing to the 1k DRAM.** Writing data to the DRAM is accomplished by bringing the  $R/\overline{W}$  input LOW with valid data present on the  $D_{IN}$  pin. Figure 1.6 shows the timing diagram for a Write cycle. The term *Write cycle time* ( $t_{WC}$ ) is related to the maximum frequency at which we can write data into the DRAM. The term *Address to Write delay time* ( $t_{AW}$ ) specifies the time between the address changing and the  $R/\overline{W}$  input going LOW. Finally, *Write pulse width* ( $t_{WP}$ ) specifies how long the input data must be present before the  $R/\overline{W}$  input can go back HIGH in preparation for another Read or Write to the DRAM. When writing to the DRAM, we can think of the  $R/\overline{W}$  input as a clock signal.

**1.1.1.3 Refreshing the 1k DRAM.** The dynamic nature of DRAM requires that the memory be refreshed periodically so as not to lose the contents of the memory cells. Later we will discuss the mechanisms that lead to the dynamic operation of the memory cell. At this point, we discuss how memory Refresh is accomplished for the 1k DRAM.

Refreshing a DRAM is accomplished internally: external data to the DRAM need not be applied. To refresh the DRAM, we periodically access the memory with every possible row address combination. A timing diagram for a Refresh cycle is shown in Figure 1.7. With the  $\overline{CE}$  input pulled HIGH, the address is changed, while the  $R/\overline{W}$  input is used as a strobe or clock signal. Internally, the data is read out and then written back into the same location at full voltage; thus, logic levels are restored (or refreshed).

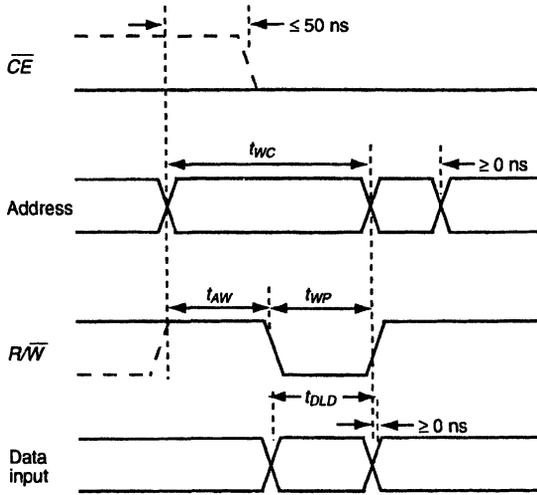


Figure 1.6 1k DRAM Write cycle.

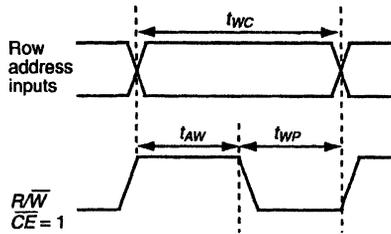


Figure 1.7 1k DRAM Refresh cycle.

**1.1.1.4 A Note on the Power Supplies.** The voltage levels used in the 1k DRAM are unusual by modern-day standards. In reviewing Figure 1.2, we see that the 1k DRAM chip uses two power supplies:  $V_{DD}$  and  $V_{SS}$ . To begin,  $V_{SS}$  is a greater voltage than  $V_{DD}$ :  $V_{SS}$  is nominally 5 V, while  $V_{DD}$  is -12 V. The value of  $V_{SS}$  was set by the need to interface to logic circuits that were implemented using transistor-transistor logic (TTL) logic. The 17-V difference between  $V_{DD}$  and  $V_{SS}$  was necessary to maintain a large signal-to-noise ratio in the DRAM array. We discuss these topics in greater detail later in the book. The  $V_{SS}$  power supply used in modern DRAM designs, at the time of this writing, is generally zero; the  $V_{DD}$  is in the neighborhood of 2.5 V.

**1.1.1.5 The 3-Transistor DRAM Cell.** One of the interesting circuits used in the 1k DRAM (and a few of the 4k and 16k DRAMs) is the 3-transistor DRAM memory cell shown in Figure 1.8. The column- and rowlines shown in the block diagram of Figure 1.1 are split into Write and Read line pairs. When the Write rowline is HIGH, M1 turns ON. At this point, the data present on the Write columnline is passed to the gate of M2, and the information voltage charges or discharges the input capacitance of M2. The next, and final, step in writing to the mbit cell is to turn OFF the Write rowline by driving it LOW. At this point, we should be able to see why the memory is called dynamic. The charge stored on the input capacitance of M2 will leak off over time.

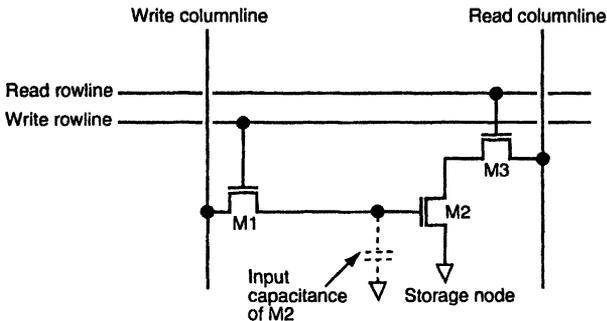


Figure 1.8 3-transistor DRAM cell.

If we want to read out the contents of the cell, we begin by first precharging the Read columnline to a known voltage and then driving the Read rowline HIGH. Driving the Read rowline HIGH turns M3 ON and allows M2 either to pull the Read columnline LOW or to not change the precharged voltage of the Read columnline. (If M2's gate is a logic LOW, then M2 will be OFF, having no effect on the state of the Read columnline.) The main drawback of using the 3-transistor DRAM cell, and the reason it is no longer used, is that it requires two pairs of column and rowlines and a large layout area. Modern 1-transistor, 1-capacitor DRAM cells use a single rowline, a single columnline, and considerably less area.

### 1.1.2 The 4k–64 Meg DRAM (Second Generation)

We distinguish second-generation DRAMs from first-generation DRAMs by the introduction of multiplexed address inputs, multiple memory

arrays, and the 1-transistor/1-capacitor memory cell. Furthermore, second-generation DRAMs offer more modes of operation for greater flexibility or higher speed operation. Examples are *page mode*, *nibble mode*, *static column mode*, *fast page mode* (FPM), and *extended data out* (EDO). Second-generation DRAMs range in size from 4k (4,096 x 1 bit, i.e., 4,096 address locations with 1-bit input/output word size) up to 64 Meg (67,108,864 bits) in memory sizes of 16 Meg x 4 organized as 16,777,216 address locations with 4-bit input/output word size, 8 Meg x 8, or 4 Meg x 16.

Two other major changes occurred in second-generation DRAMs: (1) the power supply transitioned to a single 5 V and (2) the technology advanced from NMOS to CMOS. The change to a single 5 V supply occurred at the 64kbit density. It simplified system design to a single power supply for the memory, processor, and any TTL logic used in the system. As a result, rowlines had to be driven to a voltage greater than 5 V to turn the NMOS access devices fully ON (more on this later), and the substrate held at a potential less than zero. For voltages outside the supply range, charge pumps are used (see Chapter 6). The move from NMOS to CMOS, at the 1Mb density level, occurred because of concerns over speed, power, and layout size. At the cost of process complexity, complementary devices improved the design.

**1.1.2.1 Multiplexed Addressing.** Figure 1.9 shows a 4k DRAM block diagram, while Figure 1.10 shows the pin connections for a 4k chip. Note that compared to the block diagram of the 1k DRAM shown in Figure 1.1, the number of address input pins has decreased from 10 to 6, even though the memory size has quadrupled. This is the result of using multiplexed addressing in which the same address input pins are used for both the row and column addresses. The row address strobe ( $\overline{RAS}$ ) input clocks the address present on the DRAM address pins  $A_0$  to  $A_5$  into the row address latches on the falling edge. The column address strobe ( $\overline{CAS}$ ) input clocks the input address into the column address latches on its falling edge.

Figure 1.11 shows the timing relationships between  $\overline{RAS}$ ,  $\overline{CAS}$ , and the address inputs. Note that  $t_{RC}$  is still (as indicated in the last section) the random cycle time for the DRAM, indicating the maximum rate we can write to or read from a DRAM. Note too how the row (or column) address must be present on the address inputs when  $\overline{RAS}$  (or  $\overline{CAS}$ ) goes LOW. The parameters  $t_{RAS}$  and  $t_{CAS}$  indicate how long  $\overline{RAS}$  or  $\overline{CAS}$  must remain LOW after clocking in a column or row address. The parameters  $t_{ASR}$ ,  $t_{RAH}$ ,  $t_{ASC}$ , and  $t_{CAH}$  indicate the setup and hold times for the row and column addresses, respectively.

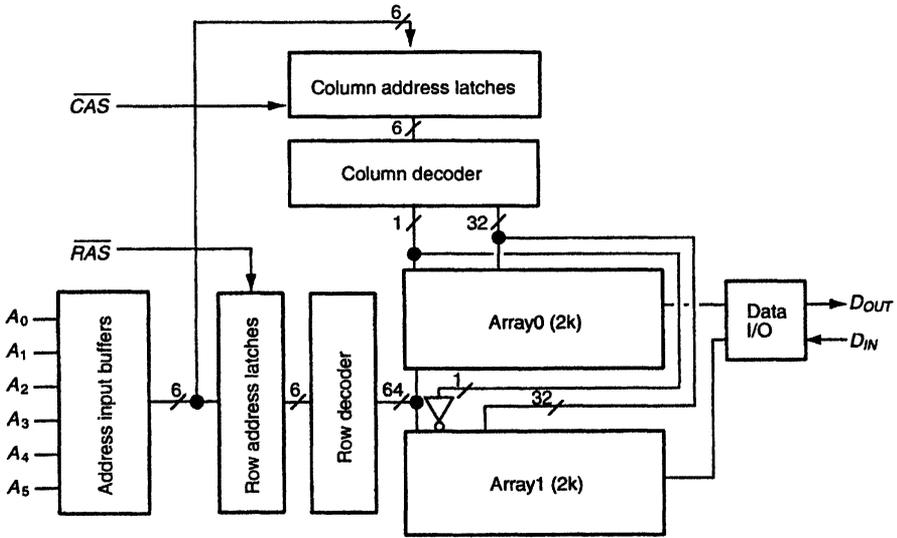


Figure 1.9 Block diagram of a 4k DRAM.

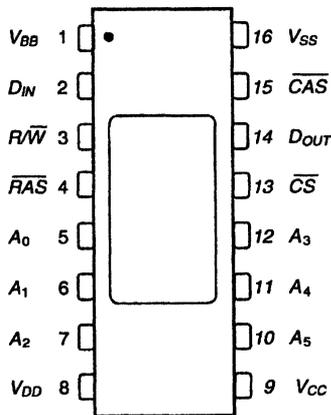


Figure 1.10 4,096-bit DRAM pin connections.

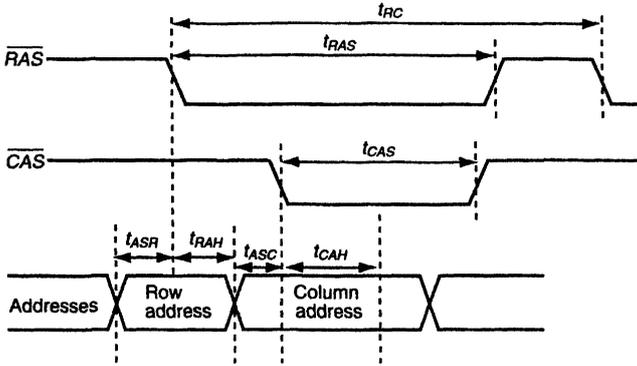
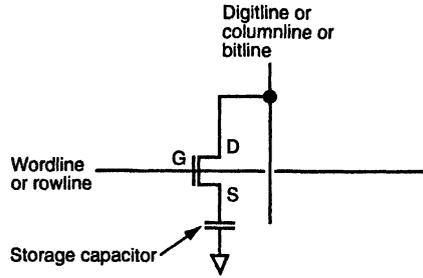


Figure 1.11 Address timing.

**1.1.2.2 Multiple Memory Arrays.** As mentioned earlier, second-generation DRAMs began to use multiple or segmented memory arrays. The main reason for splitting up the memory into more than one array at the cost of a larger layout area can be understood by considering the parasitics present in the dynamic memory circuit element. To understand the origins of these parasitics, consider the modern DRAM memory cell comprising one MOSFET and one capacitor, as shown in Figure 1.12.

In the next section, we cover the operation of this cell in detail. Here we introduce the operation of the cell. Data is written to the cell by driving the rowline (a.k.a., wordline) HIGH, turning ON the MOSFET, and allowing the columnline (a.k.a., digitline or bitline) to charge or discharge the storage capacitor. After looking at this circuit for a moment, we can make the following observations:

1. The wordline (rowline) may be fabricated using polysilicon (poly). This allows the MOSFET to be formed by crossing the poly wordline over an n+ active area.
2. To write a full  $V_{CC}$  logic voltage (where  $V_{CC}$  is the maximum positive power supply voltage) to the storage capacitor, the rowline must be driven to a voltage greater than  $V_{CC} +$  the n-channel MOSFET threshold voltage (with body effect). This voltage,  $> V_{CC} + V_{TH}$ , is often labeled  $V_{CC}$  pumped ( $V_{CCP}$ ).
3. The bitline (columnline) may be made using metal or polysilicon. The main concern, as we'll show in a moment, is to reduce the parasitic capacitance associated with the bitline.



**Figure 1.12** 1-transistor, 1-capacitor (1T1C) memory cell.

Consider the row of  $N$  dynamic memory elements shown in Figure 1.13. Typically, in a modern DRAM,  $N$  is 512, which is also the number of bitlines. When a row address is strobed into the DRAM, via the address input pins using the falling edge of  $\overline{RAS}$ , the address is decoded to drive a wordline (rowline) to  $V_{CCP}$ . *This turns ON an entire row in a DRAM memory array.* Turning ON an entire row in a DRAM memory array allows the information stored on the capacitors to be sensed (for a Read) via the bitlines or allows the charging or discharging, via the bitlines, of the storage capacitors (for a Write). Opening a row of data by driving a wordline HIGH is a **very important** concept for understanding the modes of DRAM operation. For Refresh, we only need to supply row addresses during a Refresh operation. For page Reads—when a row is open—a large amount of data, which is set by the number of columns in the DRAM array, can be accessed by simply changing the column address.

We’re now in a position to answer the question: “Why are we limited to increasing the number of columnlines (or bitlines) used in a memory array?” or “Why do we need to break up the memory into smaller memory arrays?” The answer to these questions comes from the realization that the more bitlines we use in an array, the longer the delay through the wordline (see Figure 1.13).

If we drive the wordline on the left side of Figure 1.13 HIGH, the signal will take a finite time to reach the end of the wordline (the wordline on the right side of Figure 1.13). This is due to the distributed resistance/capacitance structure formed by the resistance of the polysilicon wordline and the capacitance of the MOSFET gates. The delay limits the speed of DRAM operation. To be precise, it limits how quickly a row can be opened and closed. To reduce this  $RC$  time, a polycide wordline is formed by adding a silicide, for example, a mixture of a refractory metal such as tungsten with

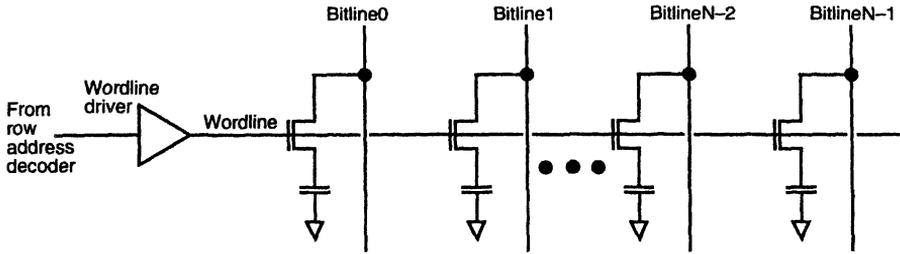


Figure 1.13 Row of N dynamic memory elements.

polysilicon, on top of polysilicon. Using a polycide wordline will have the effect of reducing the wordline resistance. Also, additional drivers can be placed at different locations along the wordline, or the wordline can be *stitched* at various locations with metal.

The limitations on the additional number of wordlines can be understood by realizing that by adding more wordlines to the array, more parasitic capacitance is added to the bitlines. This parasitic capacitance becomes important when sensing the value of data charge stored in the memory element. We'll discuss this in more detail in the next section.

**1.1.2.3 Memory Array Size.** A comment is in order about memory array size and how addressing can be used for setting word and page size. (We'll explain what this means in a moment.) If we review the block diagram of the 4k DRAM shown in Figure 1.9, we see that two 2k-DRAM memory arrays are used. Each 2k memory is composed of 64 wordlines and 32 bitlines for 2,048 memory elements/address locations per array. In the block diagram, notice that a single bit, coming from the column decoder, can be used to select data, via the bitlines, from Array0 or Array1.

From our discussion earlier, we can open a row in Array0 while at the same time opening a row in Array1 by simply applying a row address to the input address pins and driving  $\overline{RAS}$  LOW. Once the rows are open, it is a simple matter of changing the column address to select different data associated with the same open row from either array. If our word size is 1 bit, we could define a page as being 64 bits in length (32 bits from each array). We could also define our page size as 32 bits with a 2-bit word for input/output. We would then say that the DRAM is a 4k DRAM organized as 2k x 2. Of course, in the 4k DRAM, in which the number of bits is small, the concepts of page reads or size aren't too useful. We present them here simply to illustrate the concepts. Let's consider a more practical and modern configuration.

Suppose we have a 64-Meg DRAM organized as 16 Meg x 4 (4 bits input/output) using 4k row address locations and 4k column address locations (12 bits or pins are needed for each 4k of addressing). If our (sub) memory array size is 256kbits, then we have a total of 256 memory arrays on our DRAM chip. We'll assume that there are 512 wordlines and 512 bitlines (digitlines), so that the memory array is logically square. (However, physically, as we shall see, the array is not square.) Internal to the chip, in the address decoders, we can divide the row and column addresses into two parts: the lower 9 bits for addressing the wordlines/bitlines in a 256k memory array and the upper 3 bits for addressing one of the 64 "group-of-four" memory arrays (6 bits total coming from the upper 3 bits of the row and column addresses).

Our 4-bit word comes from the group-of-four memory arrays (one bit from each memory array). We can define a page of data in the DRAM by realizing that when we open a row in each of the four memory arrays, we are accessing 2k of data (512 bits/array x 4 arrays). By simply changing the column address without changing the row address and thus opening another group-of-four wordlines, we can access the 2k "page" of data. With a little imagination, we can see different possibilities for the addressing. For example, we could open 8 group-of-four memory arrays with a row address and thus increase the page size to 16k, or we could use more than one bit at a time from an array to increase word size.

**1.1.2.4 Refreshing the DRAM.** Refreshing the DRAM is accomplished by sequentially opening each row in the DRAM. (We'll discuss how the DRAM cell is refreshed in greater detail later in the book.) If we use the 64-Meg example in the last section, we need to supply 4k row addresses to the DRAM by changing the external address inputs from 000000000000 to 111111111111 while clocking the addresses into the DRAM using the falling edge of  $\overline{RAS}$ . In some DRAMs, an internal row address counter is present to make the DRAM easier to refresh. The general specification for 64-Meg DRAM Refresh is that all rows must be refreshed at least every 64 ms, which is an average of 15.7  $\mu$ s per row. This means, that if the Read cycle time  $t_{RC}$  is 100 ns (see Figure 1.11), it will take  $4,096 \cdot 100$  ns or 410  $\mu$ s to refresh a DRAM with 4k of row addresses. The percentage of time the DRAM is unavailable due to Refresh can be calculated as  $410 \mu\text{s}/64 \text{ ms}$  or 0.64% of the time. Note that the Refresh can be a burst, taking 410  $\mu$ s as just described, or distributed, where a row is refreshed every 15.7  $\mu$ s.

**1.1.2.5 Modes of Operation.** From the last section, we know that we can open a row in one or more DRAM arrays concurrently, allowing a page

of data to be written to or read from the DRAM. In this section, we look at the different modes of operation possible for accessing this data via the column address decoder. Our goal in this section is not to present all possible modes of DRAM operation but rather to discuss the modes that have been used in second-generation DRAMs. These modes are page mode, nibble mode, static column mode, fast page mode, and extended data out.

Figure 1.14 shows the timing diagram for a page mode Read, Write, and Read-Modify-Write. We can understand this timing diagram by first noticing that when  $\overline{RAS}$  goes LOW, we clock in a row address, decode the row address, and then drive a wordline in one or more memory arrays to  $V_{CCP}$ . The result is an open row(s) of data sitting on the digitlines (columnlines). *Only one row can be opened in any single array at a time.* Prior to opening a row, the bitlines are precharged to a known voltage. (Precharging to  $V_{CC}/2$  is typically performed using internal circuitry.) Also notice at this time that data out,  $D_{OUT}$ , is in a Hi-Z state; that is, the DRAM is not driving the bus line connected to the  $D_{OUT}$  pin.

The next significant timing event occurs when  $\overline{CAS}$  goes LOW and the column address is clocked into the DRAM (Figure 1.14). At this time, the column address is decoded, and, assuming that the data from the open row is sitting on the digitlines, it is steered using the column address decoder to  $D_{OUT}$ . We may have an open row of 512 bits, but we are steering only one bit to  $D_{OUT}$ . Notice that when  $\overline{CAS}$  goes HIGH,  $D_{OUT}$  goes back to the Hi-Z state.

By strobing in another column address with the same open row, we can select another bit of data (again via the column address decoder) to steer to the  $D_{OUT}$  pin. In this case, however, we have changed the DRAM to the Write mode (Figure 1.14). This allows us to write, with the same row open via the  $D_{IN}$  pin in Figure 1.10, to any column address on the open row. *Later, second-generation DRAMs used the same pins for both data input and output to reduce pin count. These bidirectional pins are labeled DQ.*

The final set of timing signals in Figure 1.14 (the right side) read data out of the DRAM with  $R/\overline{W}$  HIGH, change  $R/\overline{W}$  to a LOW, and then write to the same location. Again, when  $\overline{CAS}$  goes HIGH,  $D_{OUT}$  goes back to the Hi-Z state.

The remaining modes of operation are simple modifications of page mode. As seen in Figure 1.15, FPM allows the column address to change while  $\overline{CAS}$  is LOW. The speed of the DRAM improves by reducing the delay between  $\overline{CAS}$  going LOW and valid data present, or accessed, on  $D_{OUT}$  ( $t_{CAC}$ ). EDO is simply an FPM DRAM that doesn't force  $D_{OUT}$  to a Hi-Z state when  $\overline{CAS}$  goes HIGH. The data out of the DRAM is thus available

for a longer period of time, allowing for faster operation. In general, opening the row is the operation that takes the longest amount of time. Once a row is open, the data sitting on the columnlines can be steered to  $D_{OUT}$  at a fast rate. Interestingly, using column access modes has been the primary method of boosting DRAM performance over the years.

The other popular modes of operation in second-generation DRAMs were the static column and nibble modes. Static column mode DRAMs used flow-through latches in the column address path. When a column address was changed externally, with  $\overline{CAS}$  LOW, the column address fed directly to the column address decoder. (The address wasn't clocked on the falling edge of  $\overline{CAS}$ .) This increased the speed of the DRAM by preventing the outputs from going into the Hi-Z state with changes in the column address.

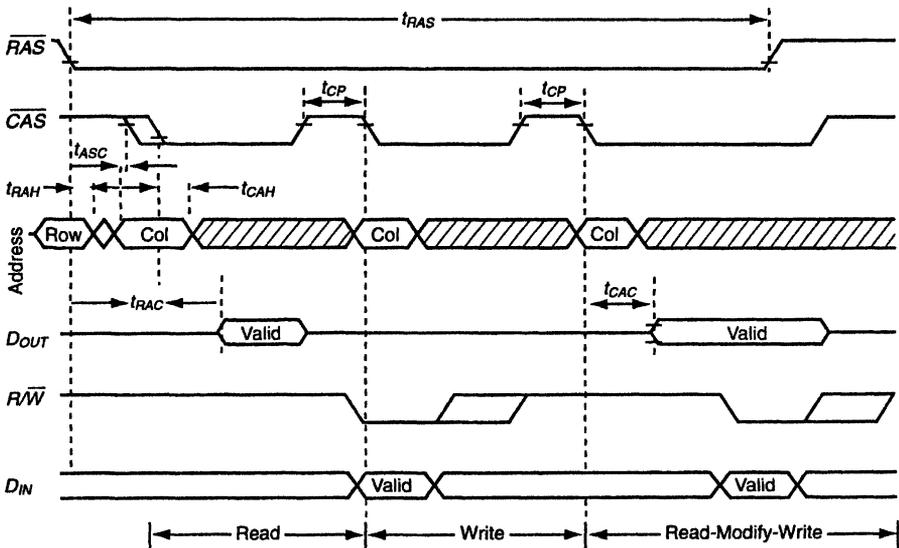


Figure 1.14 Page mode.

Nibble mode DRAMs used an internal presettable address counter so that by strobing  $\overline{CAS}$ , the column address would change internally. Figure 1.16 illustrates the timing operation for a nibble mode DRAM. The first time  $\overline{CAS}$  transitions LOW (first being defined as the first transition after  $\overline{RAS}$  goes LOW), the column address is loaded into the counter. If  $\overline{RAS}$  is held LOW and  $\overline{CAS}$  is toggled, the internal address counter is incremented, and the sequential data appears on the output of the DRAM. The term *nibble mode* comes from limiting the number of  $\overline{CAS}$  cycles to four (a nibble).

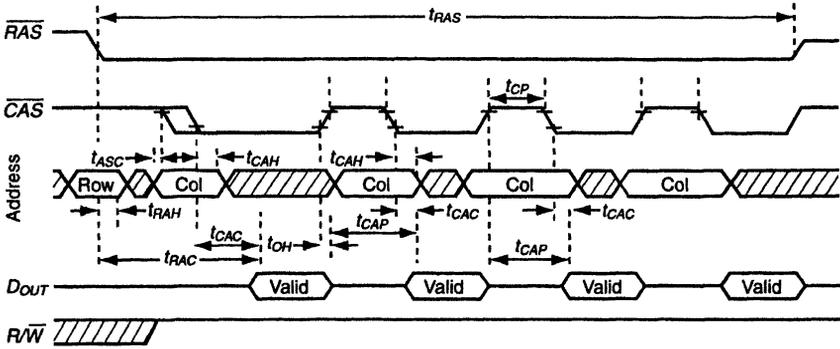


Figure 1.15 Fast page mode.

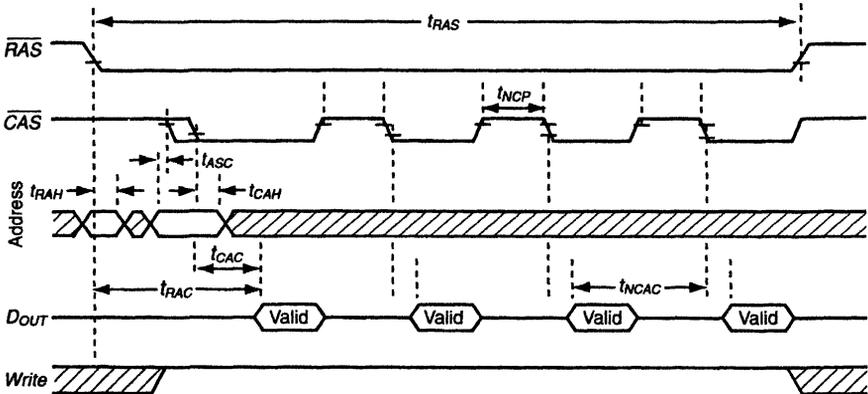


Figure 1.16 Nibble mode.

### 1.1.3 Synchronous DRAMs (Third Generation)

Synchronous DRAMs (SDRAMs) are made by adding a synchronous interface between the basic core DRAM operation/circuitry of second-generation DRAMs and the control coming from off-chip to make the DRAM operation faster. All commands and operations to and from the DRAM are executed on the rising edge of a master or command clock signal that is common to all SDRAMs and labeled *CLK*. See Figure 1.17 for the pin connections of a 64Mb SDRAM with 16-bit input/output (I/O).

At the time of this writing, SDRAMs operate with a maximum *CLK* frequency in the range of 100–143 MHz. This means that if a 64Mb SDRAM

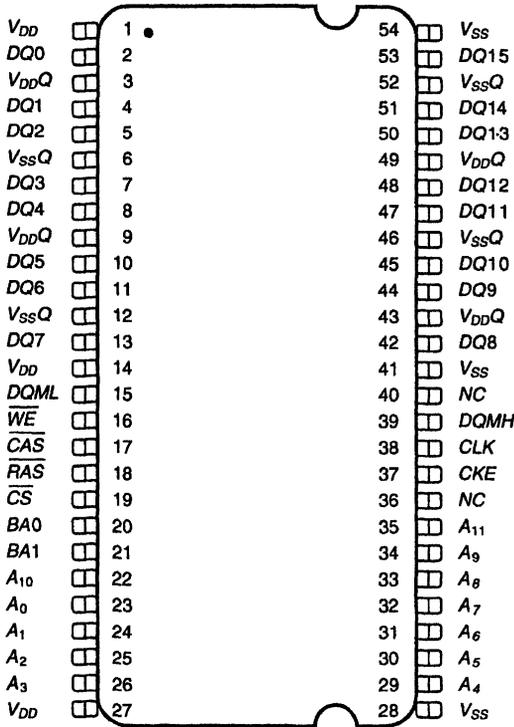


Figure 1.17 Pin connections of a 64Mb SDRAM with 16-bit I/O.

is organized as a x16 part (that is, the input/output word size is 16 bits), the maximum rate at which the words can be written to the part is 200–286 MB/s.

Another variation of the SDRAM is the *double-data-rate SDRAM* (DDR SDRAM, or simply DDR DRAM). The DDR parts register commands and operations on the rising edge of the clock signal while allowing data to be transferred on both the rising and falling edges. A differential input clock signal is used in the DDR DRAM with the labeling of, not surprisingly, *CLK* and *CLK*. In addition, the DDR DRAM provides an output data strobe, labeled *DQS*, synchronized with the output data and the input *CLK*. *DQS* is used at the controller to strobe in data from a DRAM. The big benefit of using a DDR part is that the data transfer rate can be twice the clock frequency because data can be transferred on both the rising and falling edges of *CLK*. This means that when using a 133 MHz clock, the data written to and read from the DRAM can be transferred at 266M words/s. Using the numbers from the previous paragraph, this means that a 64Mb DDR

SDRAM with an input/output word size of 16 bits will transfer data to and from the memory controller at 400–572 MB/s.

Figure 1.18 shows the block diagram of a 64Mb SDRAM with 16-bit I/O. Note that although  $CLK$  is now used for transferring data, we still have the second-generation control signals  $\overline{CS}$ ,  $\overline{WE}$ ,  $\overline{CAS}$ , and  $\overline{RAS}$  present on the part. ( $CKE$  is a clock enable signal which, unless otherwise indicated, is assumed HIGH.) Let's discuss how these control signals are used in an SDRAM by recalling that in a second-generation DRAM, a Write was executed by first driving  $\overline{WE}$  and  $\overline{CS}$  LOW. Next a row was opened by applying a row address to the part and then driving  $\overline{RAS}$  LOW. (The row address is latched on the falling edge of  $\overline{RAS}$ .) Finally, a column address was applied and latched on the falling edge of  $\overline{CAS}$ . A short time later, the data applied to the part would be written to the accessed memory location.

For the SDRAM Write, we change the syntax of the descriptions of what's happening in the part. However, the fundamental operation of the DRAM circuitry is the same as that of the second-generation DRAMs. We can list these syntax changes as follows:

1. The memory is segmented into banks. For the 64Mb memory of Figure 1.17 and Figure 1.18, each bank has a size of 16Mbs (organized as 4,096 row addresses [12 bits] x 256 column addresses [8 bits] x 16 bits [16  $DQ$  I/O pins]). As discussed earlier, this is nothing more than a simple logic design of the address decoder (although in most practical situations, the banks are also laid out so that they are physically in the same area). The bank selected is determined by the addresses  $BA0$  and  $BA1$ .
2. In second-generation DRAMs, we said, "We open a row," as discussed earlier. In SDRAM, we now say, "We activate a row in a bank." We do this by issuing an active command to the part. Issuing an active command is accomplished on the rising edge of  $CLK$  with a row/bank address applied to the part with  $\overline{CS}$  and  $\overline{RAS}$  LOW, while  $\overline{CAS}$  and  $\overline{WE}$  are held HIGH.
3. In second-generation DRAMs, we said, "We write to a location given by a column address," by driving  $\overline{CAS}$  LOW with the column address

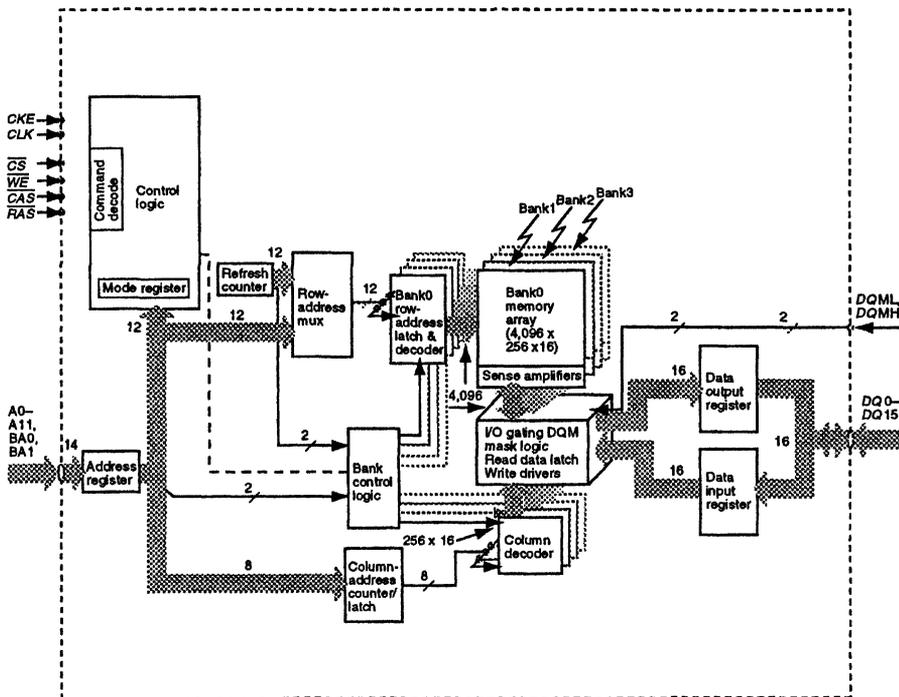


Figure 1.18 Block diagram of a 64Mb SDRAM with 16-bit I/O.

applied to the part and then applying data to the part. In an SDRAM, we write to the part by issuing the Write command to the part. Issuing a Write command is accomplished on the rising edge of  $CLK$  with a column/bank address applied to the part:  $\overline{CS}$ ,  $\overline{CAS}$ , and  $\overline{WE}$  are held LOW, and  $\overline{RAS}$  is held HIGH.

Table 1.1 shows the commands used in an SDRAM. In addition, this table shows how inputs/outputs ( $DQs$ ) can be masked using the  $DQ$  mask (DQM) inputs. This feature is useful when the DRAM is used in graphics applications.

Table 1.1 SDRAM commands. (Notes: 1)

Name	$\overline{CS}$	$\overline{RAS}$	$\overline{CAS}$	$\overline{WE}$	DQM	ADDR	DQs	Notes
Command inhibit (NOP)	H	X	X	X	X	X	X	—
No operation (NOP)	L	H	H	H	X	X	X	—
Active (select bank and activate row)	L	L	H	H	X	Bank/row	X	3
Read (select bank and column, and start Read burst)	L	H	L	H	L/H <sup>8</sup>	Bank/col	X	4
Write (select bank and column, and start Write burst)	L	H	L	L	L/H <sup>8</sup>	Bank/col	Valid	4
Burst terminate	L	H	H	L	X	X	Active	—
PRECHARGE (deactive row in bank or banks)	L	L	H	L	X	Code	X	5
Auto-Refresh or Self-Refresh (enter Self-Refresh mode)	L	L	L	H	X	X	X	6, 7
Load mode register	L	L	L	L	X	Op-code	X	2
Write Enable/output Enable	—	—	—	—	L	—	Active	8
Write inhibit/output Hi-Z	—	—	—	—	H	—	Hi-Z	8

*Notes*

1. *CKE* is HIGH for all commands shown except for Self-Refresh.
2. A0–A11 define the op-code written to the mode register.
3. A0–A11 provide row address, and BA0, BA1 determine which bank is made active.
4. A0–A9 (x4), A0–A8 (x8), or A0–A7 (x16) provide column address; A10 HIGH enables the auto *PRECHARGE* feature (nonpersistent), while A10 LOW disables the auto *PRECHARGE* feature; BA0, BA1 determine which bank is being read from or written to.

5.  $A10$  LOW:  $BA0$ ,  $BA1$  determine the bank being precharged.  $A10$  HIGH: all banks precharged and  $BA0$ ,  $BA1$  are “don’t care.”
6. This command is Auto-Refresh if  $CKE$  is HIGH and Self-Refresh if  $CKE$  is LOW.
7. Internal Refresh counter controls row addressing; all inputs and I/Os are “don’t care” except for  $CKE$ .
8. Activates or deactivates the  $DQs$  during Writes (zero-clock delay) and Reads (two-clock delay).

SDRAMs often employ pipelining in the address and data paths to increase operating speed. Pipelining is an effective tool in SDRAM design because it helps disconnect operating frequency and access latency. Without pipelining, a DRAM can only process one access instruction at a time. Essentially, the address is held valid internally until data is fetched from the array and presented to the output buffers. This single instruction mode of operation ties operating frequency and access time (or latency) together. However, with pipelining, additional access instructions can be fed into the SDRAM before prior access instructions have completed, which permits access instructions to be entered at a higher rate than would otherwise be allowed. Hence, pipelining increases operating speed.

Pipeline stages in the data path can also be helpful when synchronizing output data to the system clock.  $\overline{CAS}$  latency refers to a parameter used by the SDRAM to synchronize the output data from a Read request with a particular edge of the system clock. A typical Read for an SDRAM with  $\overline{CAS}$  latency set to three is shown in Figure 1.19. SDRAMs must be capable of reliably functioning over a range of operating frequencies while maintaining a specified  $\overline{CAS}$  latency. This is often accomplished by configuring the pipeline stage to register the output data to a specific clock edge, as determined by the  $\overline{CAS}$  latency parameter.

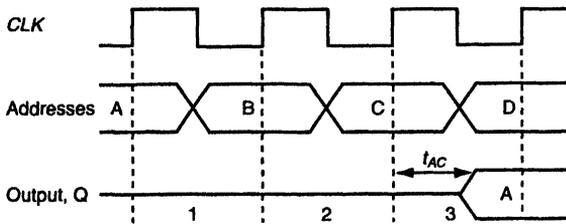


Figure 1.19 SDRAM with a latency of three.

At this point, we should understand the basics of SDRAM operation, but we may be asking, “Why are SDRAMs potentially faster than second-gener-

ation DRAMs such as EDO or FPM?” The answer to this question comes from the realization that it’s possible to activate a row in one bank and then, while the row is opening, perform an operation in some other bank (such as reading or writing). In addition, one of the banks can be in a *PRECHARGE* mode (the bitlines are driven to  $V_{CC}/2$ ) while accessing one of the other banks and, thus, in effect hiding *PRECHARGE* and allowing data to be continuously written to or read from the SDRAM. (Of course, this depends on which application and memory address locations are used.) We use a mode register, as shown in Figure 1.20, to put the SDRAM into specific modes of operation for programmable operation, including pipelining and burst Reads/Writes of data [2].

## 1.2 DRAM BASICS

A modern DRAM memory cell or memory bit (mbit), as shown in Figure 1.21, is formed with one transistor and one capacitor, accordingly referred to as a 1T1C cell. The mbit is capable of holding binary information in the form of stored charge on the capacitor. The mbit transistor operates as a switch interposed between the mbit capacitor and the digitline. Assume that the capacitor’s common node is biased at  $V_{CC}/2$ , which we will later show as a reasonable assumption. Storing a logic one in the cell requires a capacitor with a voltage of  $+V_{CC}/2$  across it. Therefore, the charge stored in the mbit capacitor is

$$Q = \frac{V_{CC}}{2} \cdot C,$$

where  $C$  is the capacitance value in farads. Conversely, storing a logic zero in the cell requires a capacitor with a voltage of  $-V_{CC}/2$  across it. Note that the stored charge on the mbit capacitor for a logic zero is

$$Q = \frac{-V_{CC}}{2} \cdot C.$$

The charge is negative with respect to the  $V_{CC}/2$  common node voltage in this state. Various leakage paths cause the stored capacitor charge to slowly deplete. To return the stored charge and thereby maintain the stored data state, the cell must be refreshed. The required refreshing operation is what makes DRAM memory dynamic rather than static.

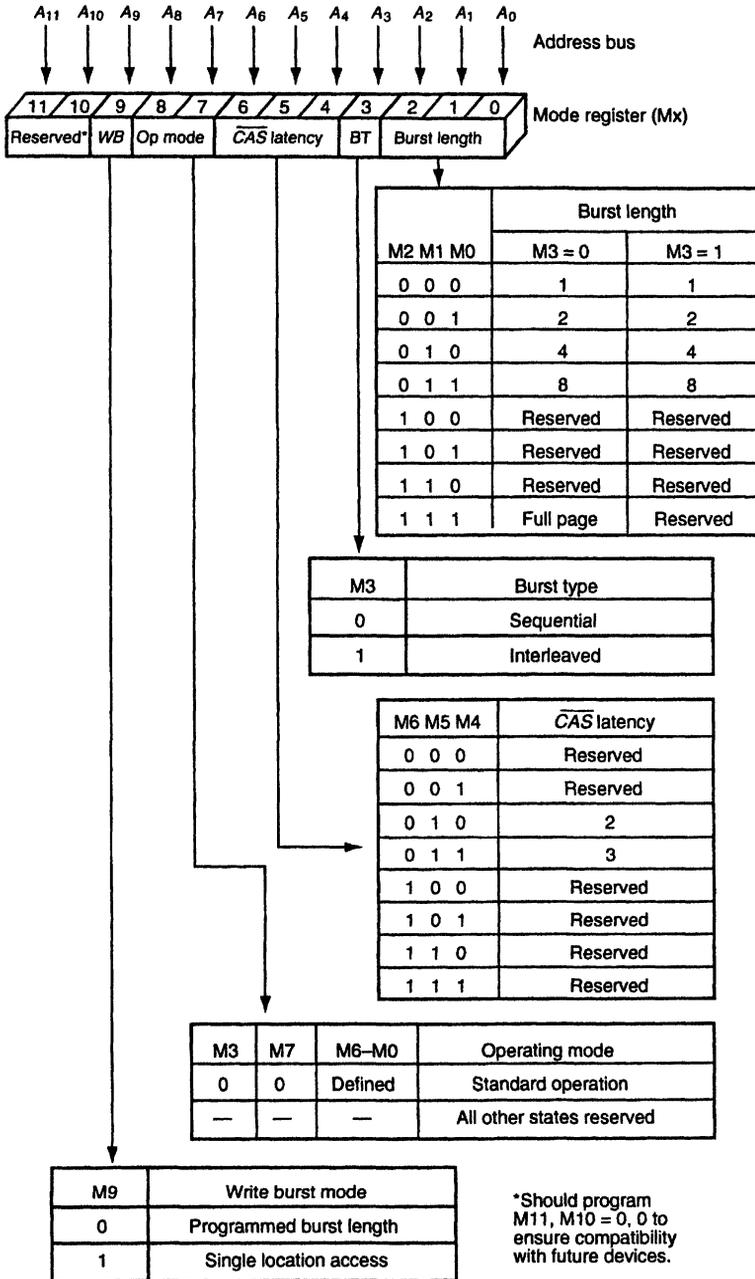
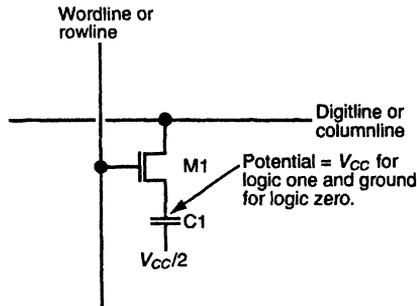


Figure 1.20 Mode register.



**Figure 1.21** 1T1C DRAM memory cell.  
(Note the rotation of the rowline and columnline.)

The digitline referred to earlier consists of a conductive line connected to a multitude of mbit transistors. The conductive line is generally constructed from either metal or silicide/polycide polysilicon. Because of the quantity of mbits connected to the digitline and its physical length and proximity to other features, the digitline is highly capacitive. For instance, a typical value for digitline capacitance on a 0.35  $\mu\text{m}$  process might be 300fF. Digitline capacitance is an important parameter because it dictates many other aspects of the design. We discuss this further in Section 2.1. For now, we continue describing basic DRAM operation.

The mbit transistor gate terminal is connected to a wordline (rowline). The wordline, which is connected to a multitude of mbits, is actually formed of the same polysilicon as that of the transistor gate. The wordline is physically orthogonal to the digitline. A memory array is formed by tiling a selected quantity of mbits together such that mbits along a given digitline do not share a common wordline and mbits along a common wordline do not share a common digitline. Examples of this are shown in Figures 1.22 and 1.23. In these layouts, mbits are paired to share a common contact to the digitline, which reduces the array size by eliminating duplication.

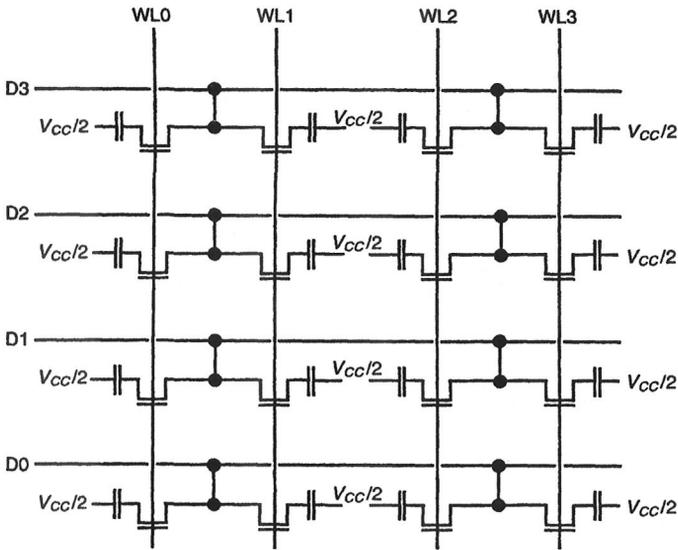


Figure 1.22 Open digitline memory array schematic.

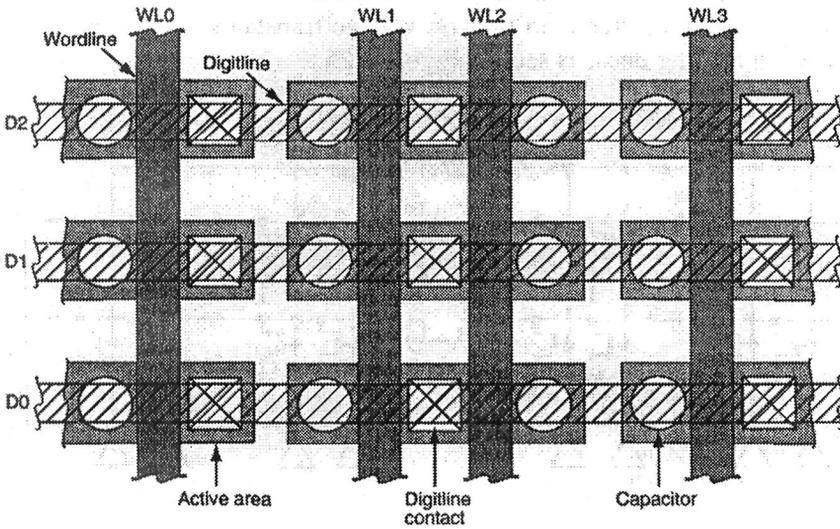


Figure 1.23 Open digitline memory array layout.

### 1.2.1 Access and Sense Operations

Next, we examine the access and sense operations. We begin by assuming that the cells connected to D1, in Figure 1.24, have logic one levels ( $+V_{CC}/2$ ) stored on them and that the cells connected to D0 have logic zero levels ( $-V_{CC}/2$ ) stored on them. Next, we form a digitline pair by considering two digitlines from adjacent arrays. The digitline pairs, labeled D0/D0\* and D1/D1\*, are initially equilibrated to  $V_{CC}/2$  V. All wordlines are initially at 0 V, ensuring that the mbit transistors are OFF. Prior to a wordline firing, the digitlines are electrically disconnected from the  $V_{CC}/2$  bias voltage and allowed to float. They remain at the  $V_{CC}/2$  PRECHARGE voltage due to their capacitance.

To read mbit1, wordline WL0 changes to a voltage that is at least one transistor  $V_{TH}$  above  $V_{CC}$ . This voltage level is referred to as  $V_{CCP}$  or  $V_{PP}$ . To ensure that a full logic one value can be written back into the mbit capacitor,  $V_{CCP}$  must remain greater than one  $V_{TH}$  above  $V_{CC}$ . The mbit capacitor begins to discharge onto the digitline at two different voltage levels depending on the logic level stored in the cell. For a logic one, the capacitor begins to discharge when the wordline voltage exceeds the digitline PRECHARGE voltage by  $V_{TH}$ . For a logic zero, the capacitor begins to discharge when the wordline voltage exceeds  $V_{TH}$ . Because of the finite rise time of the wordline voltage, this difference in turn-on voltage translates into a significant delay when reading ones, as seen in Figure 1.25.

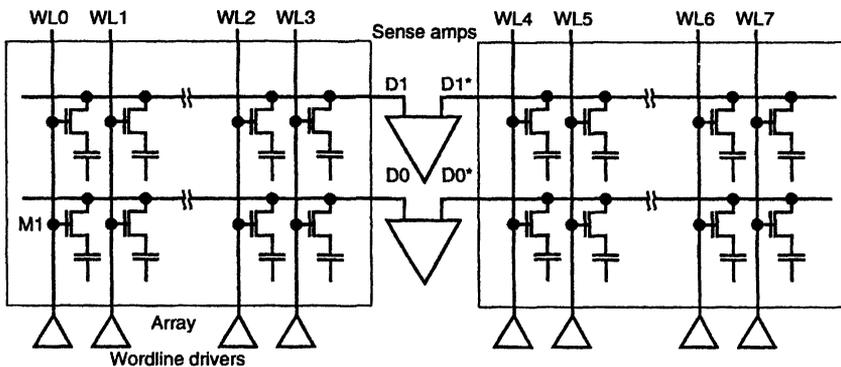


Figure 1.24 Simple array schematic (an open DRAM array).

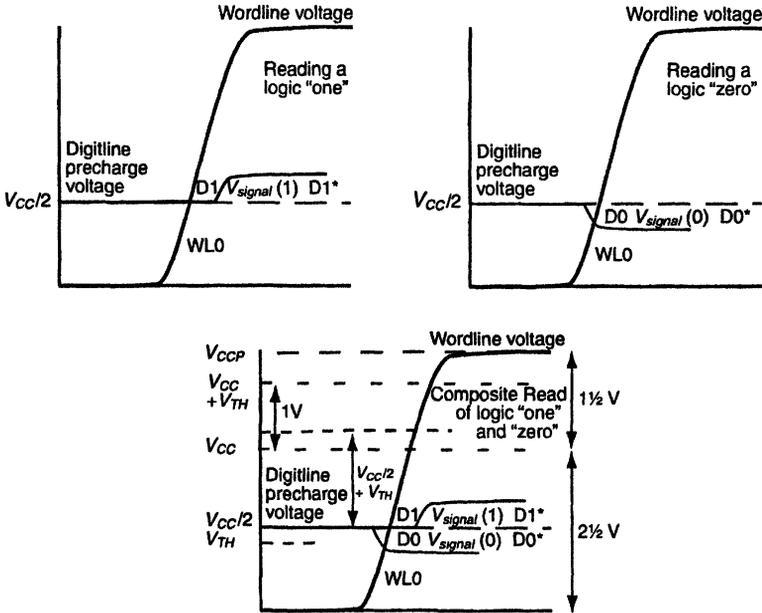


Figure 1.25 Cell access waveforms.

Accessing a DRAM cell results in charge-sharing between the mbit capacitor and the digitline capacitance. This charge-sharing causes the digitline voltage either to increase for a stored logic one or to decrease for a stored logic zero. Ideally, only the digitline connected to the accessed mbit will change. In reality, the other digitline voltage also changes slightly, due to parasitic coupling between digitlines and between the firing wordline and the other digitline. (This is especially true for the folded bitline architecture discussed later.) Nevertheless, a differential voltage develops between the two digitlines. The magnitude of this voltage difference, or signal, is a function of the *mbit capacitance* ( $C_{mbit}$ ), *digitline capacitance* ( $C_{digit}$ ), and voltage stored on the cell prior to access ( $V_{cell}$ ). See Figure 1.26. Accordingly,

$$V_{signal} = V_{cell} \cdot \frac{C_{mbit}}{C_{digit} + C_{mbit}}$$

A  $V_{signal}$  of 235mV is yielded from a design in which  $V_{cell} = 1.65$ ,  $C_{mbit} = 50\text{fF}$ , and  $C_{digit} = 300\text{fF}$ .

After the cell has been accessed, sensing occurs. Sensing is essentially the amplification of the digitline signal or the differential voltage between the digitlines. Sensing is necessary to properly read the cell data and refresh the mbit cells. (The reason for forming a digitline pair now becomes apparent.) Figure 1.27 presents a schematic diagram for a simplified sense amplifier circuit: a cross-coupled NMOS pair and a cross-coupled PMOS pair. The sense amplifiers also appear like a pair of cross-coupled inverters in which *ACT* and *NLAT\** provide power and ground. The NMOS pair or *Nsense-amp* has a common node labeled *NLAT\** (for *Nsense-amp latch*).

Similarly, the *Psense-amp* has a common node labeled *ACT* (for *Active pull-up*). Initially, *NLAT\** is biased to  $V_{CC}/2$ , and *ACT* is biased to  $V_{SS}$  or signal ground. Because the digitline pair *D1* and *D1\** are both initially at  $V_{CC}/2$ , the *Nsense-amp* transistors are both OFF. Similarly, both *Psense-amp* transistors are OFF. Again, when the mbit is accessed, a signal develops across the digitline pair. While one digitline contains charge from the cell access, the other digitline does not but serves as a reference for the Sensing operation. The sense amplifiers are generally fired sequentially: the *Nsense-amp* first, then the *Psense-amp*. Although designs vary at this point, the higher drive of NMOS transistors and better  $V_{TH}$  matching offer better sensing characteristics by *Nsense-amps* and thus lower error probability compared to *Psense-amps*.

Waveforms for the Sensing operation are shown in Figure 1.28. The *Nsense-amp* is fired by bringing *NLAT\** (*N sense-amp latch*) toward ground. As the voltage difference between *NLAT\** and the digitlines (*D1* and *D1\** in Figure 1.27) approaches  $V_{TH}$ , the NMOS transistor whose gate is connected to the higher voltage digitline begins to conduct. This conduction occurs first in the subthreshold and then in the saturation region as the gate-to-source voltage exceeds  $V_{TH}$  and causes the low-voltage digitline to discharge toward the *NLAT\** voltage. Ultimately, *NLAT\** will reach ground and the digitline will be brought to ground potential. Note that the other NMOS transistor will not conduct: its gate voltage is derived from the low-

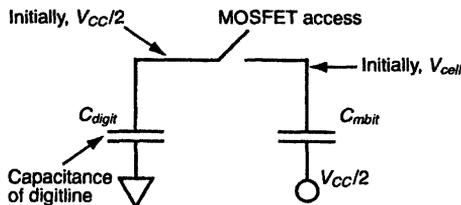


Figure 1.26 DRAM charge-sharing.

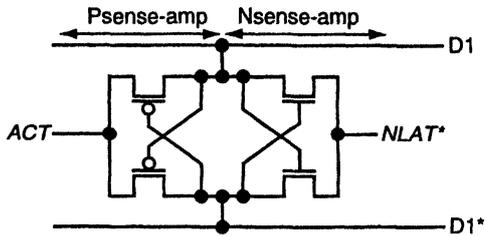


Figure 1.27 Sense amplifier schematic.

voltage digitline, which is being discharged toward ground. In reality, parasitic coupling between digitlines and limited subthreshold conduction by the second transistor result in voltage reduction on the high digitline.

Sometime after the Nsense-amp fires, ACT will be brought toward  $V_{CC}$  to activate the Psense-amp, which operates in a complementary fashion to the Nsense-amp. With the low-voltage digitline approaching ground, there is a strong signal to drive the appropriate PMOS transistor into conduction. This conduction, again moving from subthreshold to saturation, charges the high-voltage digitline toward ACT, ultimately reaching  $V_{CC}$ . Because the mbit transistor remains ON, the mbit capacitor is refreshed during the Sensing operation. The voltage, and hence charge, which the mbit capacitor held prior to accessing, is restored to a full level:  $V_{CC}$  for a logic one and ground for a logic zero. It should be apparent now why the minimum wordline voltage is a  $V_{TH}$  above  $V_{CC}$ . If  $V_{CCP}$  were anything less, a full  $V_{CC}$  level could not be written back into the mbit capacitor. The mbit transistor source voltage  $V_{source}$  cannot be greater than  $V_{gate} - V_{TH}$  because this would turn OFF the transistor.

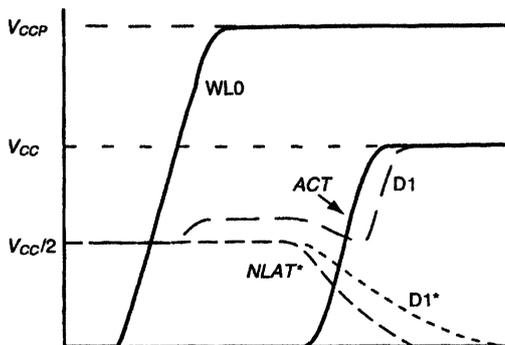


Figure 1.28 Sensing operation waveforms.

### 1.2.2 Write Operation

A Write operation is similar to a Sensing and Restore operation except that a separate Write driver circuit determines the data that is placed into the cell. The Write driver circuit is generally a tristate inverter connected to the digitlines through a second pair of pass transistors, as shown in Figure 1.29. These pass transistors are referred to as *I/O* transistors. The gate terminals of the *I/O* transistors are connected to a common *column select (CSEL)* signal. The *CSEL* signal is decoded from the column address to select which pair (or multiple pairs) of digitlines is routed to the output pad or, in this case, the Write driver.

In most current DRAM designs, the Write driver simply overdrives the sense amplifiers, which remain ON during the Write operation. After the new data is written into the sense amplifiers, the amplifiers finish the Write cycle by restoring the digitlines to full rail-to-rail voltages. An example is shown in Figure 1.30 in which *D1* is initially HIGH after the Sensing operation and LOW after the writing operation. A Write operation usually involves only 2–4 mbits within an array of mbits because a single *CSEL* line is generally connected to only four pairs of *I/O* transistors. The remaining digitlines are accessed through additional *CSEL* lines that correspond to different column address locations.

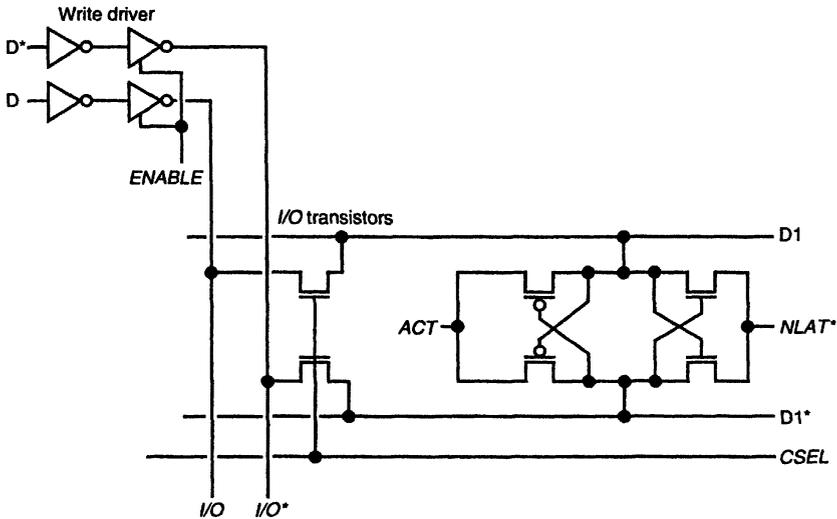


Figure 1.29 Sense amplifier schematic with I/O devices.

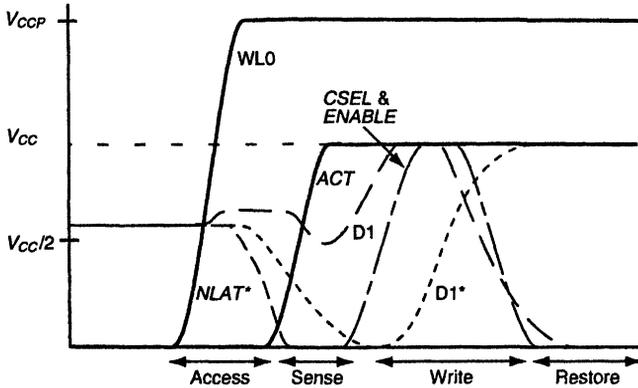


Figure 1.30 Write operation waveforms.

### 1.2.3 Opening a Row (Summary)

Opening a row of mbits in a DRAM array is a fundamental operation for both reading and writing to the DRAM array. Sometimes the chain of events from a circuit designer’s point of view, which lead to an open row, is called the  $\overline{RAS}$  timing chain. We summarize the  $\overline{RAS}$  timing chain of events below, assuming that for a second-generation DRAM both  $\overline{RAS}$  and  $\overline{CAS}$  are HIGH. (It’s trivial to extend our discussion to third-generation DRAMs where  $\overline{RAS}$  and  $\overline{CAS}$  are effectively generated from the control logic.)

1. Initially, both  $\overline{RAS}$  and  $\overline{CAS}$  are HIGH. All bitlines in the DRAM are driven to  $V_{CC}/2$ , while all wordlines are at 0 V. This ensures that all of the mbit’s access transistors in the DRAM are OFF.
2. A valid row address is applied to the DRAM and  $\overline{RAS}$  goes LOW. While the row address is being latched, on the falling edge of  $\overline{RAS}$ , and decoded, the bitlines are disconnected from the  $V_{CC}/2$  bias and allowed to float. The bitlines at this point are charged to  $V_{CC}/2$ , and they can be thought of as capacitors.
3. The row address is decoded and applied to the wordline drivers. This forces only one rowline in at least one memory array to  $V_{CCP}$ . Driving the wordline to  $V_{CCP}$  turns ON the mbits attached to this rowline and causes charge-sharing between the mbit capacitance and the capacitance of the corresponding bitline. The result is a small perturbation (upwards for a logic one and downwards for a logic zero) in the bitline voltages.

4. The next operation is Sensing, which has two purposes: (a) to determine if a logic one or zero was written to the cell and (b) to refresh the contents of the cell by restoring a full logic zero (0 V) or one ( $V_{CC}$ ) to the capacitor. Following the wordlines going HIGH, the Nsense-amp is fired by driving, via an n-channel MOSFET,  $NLAT^*$  to ground. The inputs to the sense amplifier are two bitlines: the bitline we are sensing and the bitline that is not active (a bitline that is still charged to  $V_{CC}/2$ —an inactive bitline). Pulling  $NLAT^*$  to ground results in one of the bitlines going to ground. Next, the  $ACT$  signal is pulled up to  $V_{CC}$ , driving the other bitline to  $V_{CC}$ . Some important notes:
- (a) It doesn't matter if a logic one or logic zero was sensed because the inactive and active bitlines are pulled in opposite directions.
  - (b) The contents of the active cell, after opening a row, are restored to full voltage levels (either 0 V or  $V_{CC}$ ). The entire DRAM can be refreshed by opening each row.

Now that the row is open, we can write to or read from the DRAM. In either case, it is a simple matter of steering data to or from the active array(s) using the column decoder. When writing to the array, buffers set the new logic voltage levels on the bitlines. The row is still open because the wordline remains HIGH. (The row stays open as long as  $\overline{RAS}$  is LOW.)

When reading data out of the DRAM, the values sitting on the bitlines are transmitted to the output buffers via the I/O MOSFETs. To increase the speed of the reading operation, this data, in most situations, is transmitted to the output buffer (sometimes called a  $DQ$  buffer) either through a helper flip-flop or another sense amplifier.

A note is in order here regarding the word size stored in or read out of the memory array. We may have 512 active bitlines when a single rowline in an array goes HIGH (keeping in mind once again that only one wordline in an array can go HIGH at any given time). This literally means that we could have a word size of 512 bits from the active array. The inherent wide word size has led to the push, at the time of this writing, of embedding DRAM with a processor (for example, graphics or data). The wide word size and the fact that the word doesn't have to be transmitted off-chip can result in lower-power, higher-speed systems. (Because the memory and processor don't need to communicate off-chip, there is no need for power-hungry, high-speed buffers.)

### 1.2.4 Open/Folded DRAM Array Architectures

Throughout the book, we make a distinction between the open array architecture as shown in Figures 1.22 and 1.24 and the folded DRAM array used in modern DRAMs and seen in Figure 1.31. At the cost of increased layout area, folded arrays increase noise immunity by moving sense amp inputs next to each other. These sense amp inputs come directly from the DRAM array. The term *folded* comes from taking the DRAM arrays seen in Figure 1.24 and folding them together to form the topology seen in Figure 1.31.

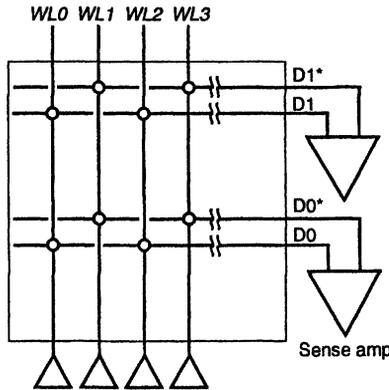


Figure 1.31 A folded DRAM array.

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- [2] Micron Technology, Inc., Synchronous DRAM Data Sheet, 1999.

### FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

See the Appendix for additional readings and references.