

(19) World Intellectual Property
Organization
International Bureau



(43) International Publication Date
8 July 2004 (08.07.2004)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 2004/057693 A2

(51) International Patent Classification⁷: **H01M 8/02**

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(21) International Application Number:
PCT/CA2003/001953

(22) International Filing Date:
18 December 2003 (18.12.2003)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
10/327,650 20 December 2002 (20.12.2002) US

(81) Designated States (*national*): AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU,
AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR,
CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD,
GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR,
KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN,
MW, MX, MZ, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PG, PH, PL, PT, RO, RU,
SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SY, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA,
UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, YU, ZA, ZM, ZW.

(84) Designated States (*regional*): ARIPO patent (BW, GH,
GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW),
Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM),
European patent (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE,
ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HU, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, RO, SE,
SI, SK, TR), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA,
GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

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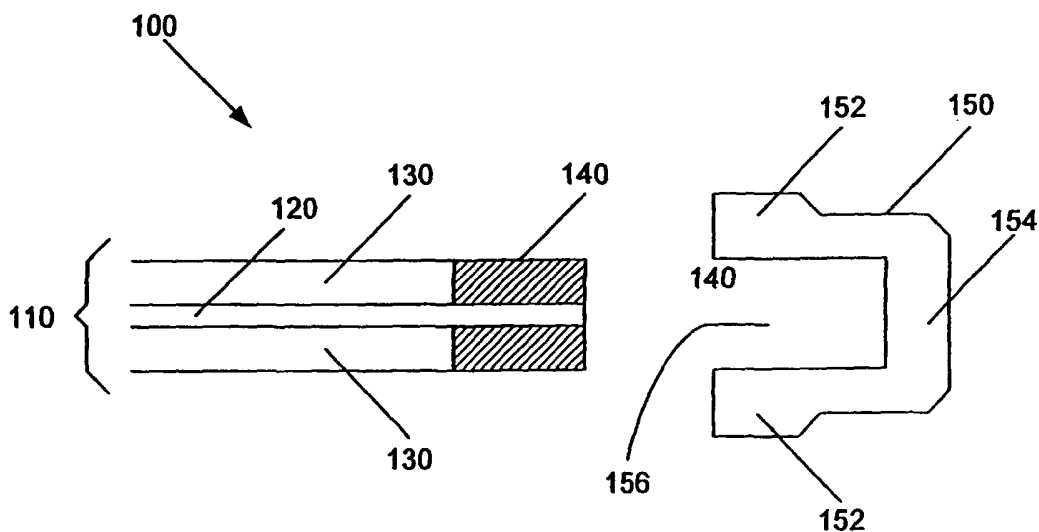
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Published:

— *without international search report and to be republished
upon receipt of that report*

[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: SEALING MEMBRANE ELECTRODE ASSEMBLIES FOR ELECTROCHEMICAL FUEL CELLS



(57) Abstract: An elastomer may be used to construct a separate, moldable part that engages the edge a membrane electrode assembly (MEA) to thereby seal the MEA. The seal has a groove defining two sealing portions separated by a web portion. The groove of the seal then engages the edge of the MEA and can maintain a tight fit without the need for additional adhesives. Additional features may extend laterally from the web portion to assist in separating cathode and anode plates and/or encompass, for example, manifold openings.



For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

5 SEALING MEMBRANE ELECTRODE ASSEMBLIES FOR
 ELECTROCHEMICAL FUEL CELLS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field Of The Invention

 The present invention relates to electrochemical fuel cells. In particular,
10 the invention provides an improved seal for a membrane electrode assembly for a fuel
 cell, and a method of making an improved membrane electrode assembly.

Description of the Related Art

 Electrochemical fuel cells convert reactants, namely, fuel and oxidant
fluid streams, to generate electric power and reaction products. Electrochemical fuel
15 cells employ an electrolyte disposed between two electrodes, namely a cathode and an
 anode. The electrodes each comprise an electrocatalyst disposed at the interface
 between the electrolyte and the electrodes to induce the desired electrochemical
 reactions. The location of the electrocatalyst generally defines the electrochemically
 active area.

20 Solid polymer fuel cells generally employ a membrane electrode
 assembly ("MEA") consisting of an ion exchange membrane disposed between two
 fluid distribution layers comprising porous, electrically conductive sheet material. The
 membrane is ion conductive (typically proton conductive), and also acts as a barrier for
 isolating the reactant streams from each other. Another function of the membrane is to
25 act as an electrical insulator between the two fluid distribution layers. The electrodes
 should be electrically insulated from each other to prevent short-circuiting.

 It is desirable to seal reactant fluid stream passages to prevent leaks or
inter-mixing of the fuel and oxidant fluid streams. Fuel cell stacks typically employ
resilient seals between stack components. Such seals isolate the manifolds and the
30 electrochemically active area of the fuel cell MEAs by circumscribing these areas. For
 example, a fluid tight seal can be achieved in a conventional fuel cell stack by using
 elastomeric gasket seals interposed between the flow field plates and the membrane,

5 with sealing effected by applying a compressive force to the resilient gasket. Accordingly, it is important for conventional fuel cell stacks to be equipped with seals and a suitable compression assembly for applying a compressive force to the seals.

Conventional methods of sealing around plate manifold openings and MEAs within fuel cells include framing the MEA with a resilient fluid impermeable
10 gasket, placing preformed gaskets in channels in the electrode layers and/or separator plates, or molding seals within grooves in the electrode layer or separator plate, circumscribing the electrochemically active area and any fluid manifold openings. Examples of conventional methods are disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,176,966 and 5,284,718. Typically, the gasket seals are cut from a sheet of gasket material. For a
15 gasket seal that seals around the electrochemically active area of the MEA, the central portion of the sheet is cut away. This procedure results in a large amount of the gasket material being wasted. Because the fluid distribution layers are porous, for the gasket seals to operate effectively, the gasket seals ordinarily are in direct contact with the flow field plates and the ion exchange membrane. Therefore, in a conventional MEA,
20 electrode material is cut away in the sealing regions so that the gasket will contact the ion exchange membrane. Some MEAs employ additional thin-film layers to protect the ion exchange membrane where it would otherwise be exposed in the gasket seal areas. Separate components such as gasket seals and thin-film layers require respective processing or assembly steps, which add to the complexity and expense of
25 manufacturing fuel cell stacks.

Accordingly, it is desirable to simplify and reduce the number of individual or separate components involved in sealing in a fuel cell stack since this reduces assembly time and the cost of manufacturing.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

30 An improved membrane electrode sealing assembly for an electrochemical fuel cell comprises:

a membrane electrode assembly having two fluid distribution layers, an ion exchange membrane and catalyst layers disposed between the ion exchange membrane and each fluid distribution layer; and

5 a framing seal having a groove, the groove defining two sealing portions separated by a web portion in the framing seal.

The groove of the framing seal engages the edge of the membrane electrode assembly.

The framing seal may be an elastomer such as, for example, silicones, 10 fluorosilicones, fluoroelastomers, ethylene-co-propylene diene monomer (EPDM), natural rubber, nitrile rubber, butyl rubber, polyurethane or a thermoplastic elastomer. The framing seal may be formed by, for example, injection molding, compression molding, insert molding, etc. The framing seal may extend laterally beyond the membrane electrode assembly to form an external region having manifold openings 15 therein. The framing seal may have manifold seals around such manifold openings as well as fluid distribution features formed therein.

A method of making such a membrane electrode sealing assembly comprises:

providing a membrane electrode assembly;
20 providing a framing seal having a groove, the groove defining two sealing portions separated by a web portion in the framing seal; and

fitting the membrane electrode assembly into the groove of the framing seal such that the framing seal engages the edge of the impregnated membrane electrode assembly.

25 A tight fit will be observed between the framing seal and the MEA if the framing seal is the same size as or slightly smaller than the MEA and thus no adhesive is necessary.

These and other aspects of the invention will be evident upon reference to the attached figures and following detailed description.

30 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a partially exploded cross-sectional view of an embodiment of a membrane electrode sealing assembly.

Figure 2 is a partially exploded cross-sectional view of a second embodiment of a membrane electrode sealing assembly.

5 Figure 3 is a partially exploded cross-sectional view of a further embodiment of a membrane electrode sealing assembly.

 Figure 4 is a plan view of a further embodiment of a membrane electrode sealing assembly.

 In the above figures, similar references are used in different figures to
10 refer to similar elements.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

 In the following description, certain specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the various embodiments of the present improved membrane electrode assembly. However, one skilled in the technology
15 involved here will understand that the present improved membrane electrode assembly can be practiced without these details. In other instances, well-known structures associated with polymer electrolyte fuel cells and fuel cell stacks have not been shown or described in detail to avoid unnecessarily obscuring descriptions of the embodiments of the present membrane electrode assembly.

20 Figure 1 illustrates an exploded cross-sectional view of a membrane electrode sealing assembly (MESA) 100. MESA 100 comprises a sealed membrane electrode assembly (MEA) 110. MEA 110 has an ion-exchange membrane 120 interposed between two fluid distribution layers 130.

 Fluid distribution layers 130 are electrically conductive and fluid
25 permeable. Electrical conductivity allows for the electron flow from the anode to the cathode through an external load. Permeability allows for the supply of fuel and oxidant from the fuel and oxidant streams respectively to the electrocatalyst where the electrochemical reaction occurs. Fluid distribution layers typically comprise porous, electrically conductive and fluid permeable preformed sheets composed of materials
30 such as, for example, carbon fiber paper, woven or non-woven carbon fabric, metal mesh or gauze, or microporous polymeric film.

 The electrocatalyst in catalyst layers (not shown) disposed between the fluid distribution layers 130 and ion-exchange membrane 120 may be a metal black, an alloy or a supported metal-based catalyst, for example, platinum on carbon particles.

5 Catalyst layers may also include an organic binder such as polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), polymer electrolyte and fillers. Due to the different catalytic reactions occurring during operation of the fuel cell at the anode as compared to the cathode, the anode catalyst layer and cathode catalyst layer typically comprise different catalytic compositions such as, for example, different catalysts and/or different amounts of
10 catalyst.

Ion exchange membrane 120 may be, for example, a fluoropolymer containing pendant sulfonic acid functional groups and/or carboxylic acid functional groups. A typical perfluorosulfonic acid/PTFE copolymer membrane can be obtained from DuPont Inc. under the trade designation NAFION®.

15 Along the edge of MEA 110, an integral seal 140 comprising a fluid-impermeable sealant material that impregnates the porous electrode layers of MEA 110. U.S. Patent No. 6,057,054, incorporated herein by reference, discloses a similar integral seal. The sealant material is chosen for mechanical and chemical resistance characteristics that are suitable for use in the fuel cell. For example, thermoplastic
20 materials can be employed such as thermoplastic polymers, and plastics and composites including thermoplastic polymers. Thermoset materials can also be suitable provided they are not too brittle.

Integral seal 140 can be formed by for example, injection molding. Suitable materials for injection molding include liquid injection moldable elastomeric
25 compounds, such as silicones, fluoroelastomers, fluorosilicones, ethylene-co-propylene diene monomer (EPDM) and natural rubber. As an alternative to injection molding, sheet material can be bonded to MEA 110. For example, a sheet of rigid sealant material could be thermally bonded, or two or more sheets laminated (thermally, or by the application of adhesives or solvents), so that the material is impregnated into the
30 porous layers of MEA 110. Suitable such sealant materials available in sheet form include polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), polyvinyl fluoride, acrylic, polyvinyl fluoride, epoxy, vinyl ester, etc. The selection of particular rigid sealant materials is not essential to the present MEA, and persons of ordinary skill in the technology involved here can readily choose suitable such sealant materials for a given application. Integral seal 140

5 may be flush with the edge of MEA 110 as illustrated in Figure 1. Alternatively, integral seal 140 may extend laterally beyond the edge of MEA 110.

A separate framing seal 150 engages the edge of MEA 110. Framing seal 150 comprises two sealing portions 152 and a web portion 154. Further, the two sealing portions and the web portion are of a unitary construction. MEA 110 fits into
10 groove 156. Each sealing portion 152 automatically aligns relative to the other sealing portion 152. Suitable materials for framing seal 150 include liquid injection moldable elastomeric compounds, such as, for example, silicones, fluoroelastomers, fluorosilicones, EPDM and natural rubber.

The material chosen for integral seal 140 may then be different from the
15 material for framing seal 150. For example, materials that are not easily impregnated into fluid distribution layers 130 or that require curing temperatures incompatible with MEA 110 may be used. Further, considerations of compatibility with MEA 110, and particularly ion exchange membrane 120, are more important with integral seal 140 than framing seal 150. Thus greater flexibility is allowed while still maintaining a reduced
20 number of sealing components.

Figure 2 illustrates another embodiment where an external seal 142 coats the edge of MEA 110 with perhaps only an incidental amount of sealant impregnating fluid distribution layers 130. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 2, ion-exchange membrane 120 extends beyond the edge of MEA 110 and is not flush-cut as in Figure 1.
25 External seal may comprise for example an epoxy or an inert polyimide film such as KAPTON® as sold by DuPont Inc.

In another embodiment as shown in Figure 3, fluid distribution layers 132 comprise a substantially fluid impermeable sheet material that is perforated at least in the electrochemically active region as disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,976,926 hereby
30 incorporated by reference. Perforations 134 render the respective fluid distribution layer fluid permeable at least in the through-plane direction. Perforations 134 may contain a filler material which may be electrically conductive or insulating. The filler material may also comprise particulate carbon or hydrophilic or hydrophobic materials which do not completely block the perforations to passage of reactant. The substantially
35 fluid impermeable sheet material in fluid distribution layers 132 may be formed from an

5 electrically conductive material such as flexible graphite, carbon resin or a metal. Flexible graphite is also known as graphite foil, exfoliated graphite and expanded graphite.

Framing seal 150 engages the edge of MEA 110 as in the other embodiments illustrated. In yet another embodiment (not shown), the framing seal
10 directly engages the MEA without the need for an additional seal such as integral seal 140 (Figure 1) or external seal 142 (Figure 2).

Framing seal 150 is molded as a separate and distinct part by, for example, injection molding, compression molding, insert molding, etc. After bonding of MEA 110 and integral seal 140 has been impregnated, framing seal 150 may then be
15 stretched over the edges of MEA 110. In some applications, MEA 110 may have a non-bonded configuration. An external fixture may be also be easily adapted to assist in applying framing seal 150 to MEA 110. The size of framing seal 150 determines how well framing seal 150 fits onto MEA 110. If framing seal 150 is slightly undersized, a tight fit with MEA 110 may be observed without deforming MEA 110. Further, no
20 adhesive is needed between framing seal 150 and MEA 110. As an alternative to stretching framing seal 150 over MEA 110, interlocking tabs or a zipper-like feature could be molded into framing seal 150 (embodiment not illustrated).

Figure 4 illustrates a plan view of another embodiment of MESA 100 wherein web 154 of framing seal 150 extends laterally beyond MEA 110 and
25 encompasses manifold openings 160. Each manifold opening 160 provides one of reactant, oxidant and coolant to the fuel cell. In the region laterally extending from MEA 110, web 154 may be substantially thinner than MEA 110. Manifold seals 165 may also be formed in framing seal 150. As web 154 is molded from an electrically isolating material, web 154 may also electrically isolate anode and cathode flow field
30 plates (not shown). Other features (not shown) may also be molded into framing seal 150 to help position MESA 100 against adjacent flow field plates.

In addition, the region of framing seal 150 between MEA 110 and manifold openings 160 may also incorporate fluid distribution features (not shown) for assisting flow of reactants and/or coolant from respective manifold openings 160 to the

- 5 active area of MEA 110. Such features could be molded, stamped or otherwise formed in framing seal 150, as desired.

From the foregoing, it will be appreciated that, although specific embodiments of the invention have been described herein for purposes of illustration, various modifications may be made without deviating from the spirit and scope of the
10 invention. Accordingly, the invention is not limited except as by the appended claims.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A membrane electrode sealing assembly comprising:
a membrane electrode assembly having two electrodes, an ion exchange membrane and catalyst layers disposed between the ion exchange membrane and each electrode; and
a framing seal having a groove, the groove defining two sealing portions separated by a web portion in the framing seal;
wherein the groove of the framing seal engages the edge of the membrane electrode assembly.
2. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 1 wherein the framing seal is an elastomer.
3. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 2 wherein the framing seal is an elastomer selected from silicones, fluorosilicones, fluoroelastomers, ethylene-co-propylene diene monomer, natural rubber, nitrile rubber, butyl rubber, polyurethane and a thermoplastic.
4. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 1 further comprising an integral seal impregnated into each electrode along the edge of the membrane electrode assembly.
5. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 4 wherein the integral seal and the framing seal are different sealant materials.
6. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 4 wherein the integral seal is an elastomeric selected from the group of silicones, fluorosilicones,

fluoroelastomers, ethylene propylene diene monomer, natural rubber, polytetrafluoroethylene, polyvinyl fluoride, acrylic and polyvinyl fluoride.

7. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 1 wherein the framing seal further comprises an external region that extends laterally from the web portion.

8. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 7 wherein the external region comprises manifold openings therein.

9. The membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 7 wherein the external region comprises fluid distribution features formed therein.

10. A fuel cell comprising the membrane electrode sealing assembly of claim 1.

11. A seal for a membrane electrode assembly, the seal comprising a groove in an elastomer, the groove defining two sealing portions separated by a web portion.

12. The seal of claim 11 wherein the elastomer is selected from silicones, fluorosilicones, fluoroelastomers, ethylene-co-propylene diene monomer, natural rubber, nitrile rubber, butyl rubber, polyurethane and a thermoplastic.

13. A method of making a membrane electrode sealing assembly comprising:

providing a membrane electrode assembly;

providing a framing seal having a groove, the groove defining two sealing portions separated by a web portion in the framing seal; and

fitting the membrane electrode assembly into the groove of the framing seal such that the framing seal envelopes the edge of the impregnated membrane electrode assembly.

14. The method of claim 13 wherein the providing a membrane electrode assembly step comprises bonding two electrodes and an ion exchange membrane together to form a membrane electrode assembly.

15. The method of claim 13 wherein the providing a membrane electrode assembly step further comprises impregnating sealant material into the edge of the electrodes.

16. The method of claim 13 wherein the framing seal further comprises an external region that extends laterally from the web portion., the external region having manifold openings therein.

Figure 1

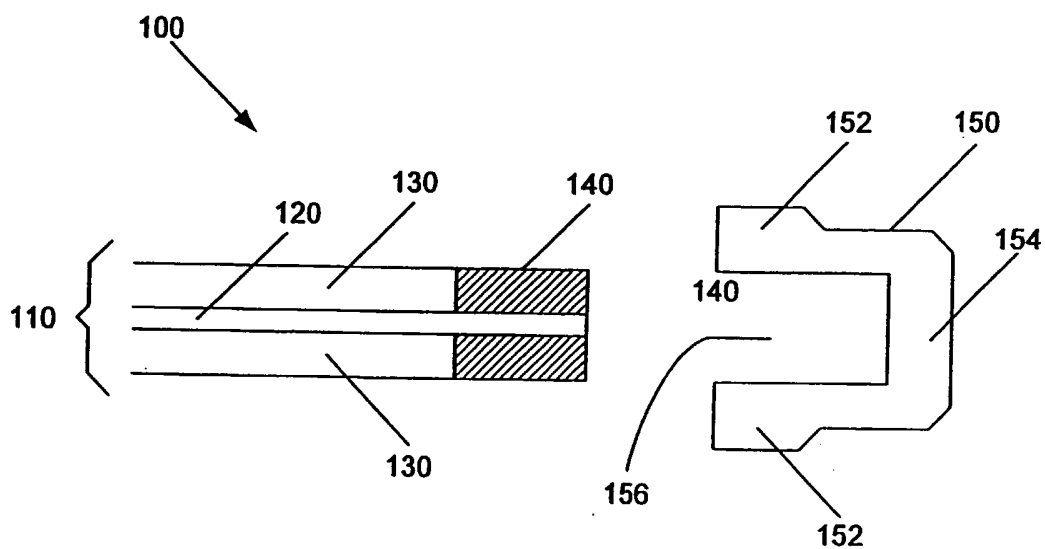


Figure 2

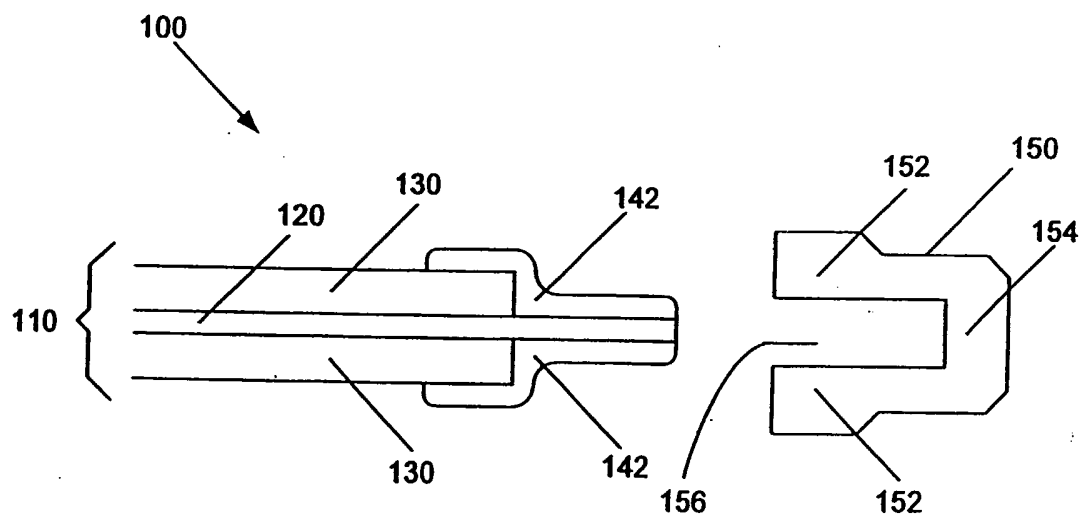
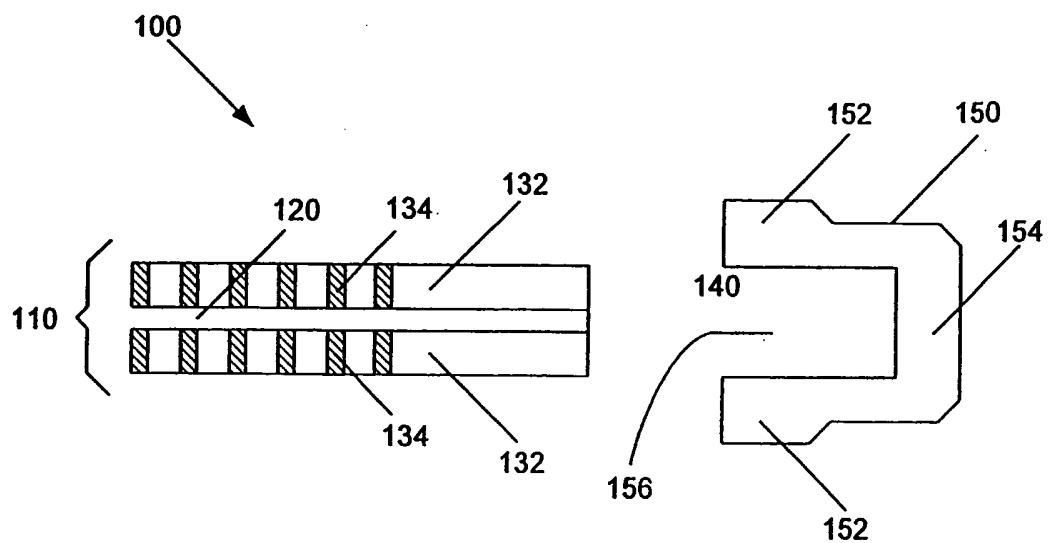


Figure 3**Figure 4**