

Aliasing on the Digital Oscilloscope*

A sinusoidal signal displayed on an oscilloscope has long been a standard tool in physics investigations. On the original analog 'scopes, the frequency and amplitude of that trace could be counted on to give reliable and important insights into a wide variety of processes. With the advent of the digital oscilloscope, however, came *aliasing*, a phenomenon in which traces that seem to be showing a sinusoid of a particular frequency turn out to be a kind of mirage. A signal that seems perfectly 'on resonance' turns out to be anything but. And even experienced experimentalists find themselves tripped up by its apparent perfection. Understanding why aliasing occurs, and how to check your signals to be sure they are 'real', is an important part of data taking.

A typical digital oscilloscope samples the input waveform at fixed time intervals. It then displays the digitized samples on the oscilloscope screen. These sampled points might be connected by straight-line segments in order to give, at least roughly, the appearance of a smooth waveform. Figure 1 shows a 2200 Hz sinusoidal waveform and, for comparison, an approximation that would result if the waveform were sampled at 10 kHz. The samples are shown as squares, and the squares are shown connected by straight line segments.

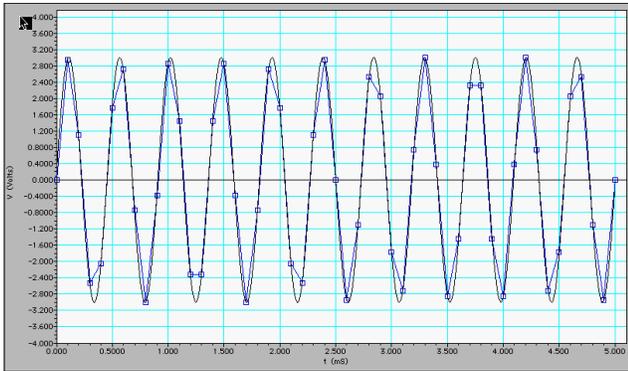


Figure 1. The rough approximation that results when a 2.2 kHz sinusoidal waveform is sampled at 10 kHz

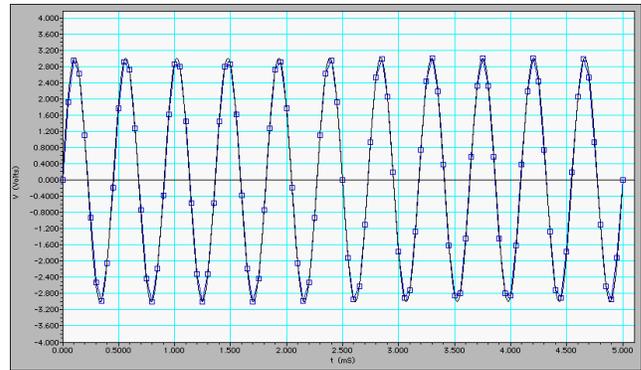


Figure 2. The relatively smooth wave form that results when a 2.2 kHz sinusoidal waveform is sampled at 20 kHz

In constructing Figure 1, the time between samples was assumed to be 0.1 ms, which corresponds to a sampling frequency of 10 kHz. This is only 4.5 times the frequency of the input signal. Thus, on average, each cycle of the input signal is approximated by only about 5 points. Furthermore, the points are joined by straight line segments rather than a smooth curve. The distortion is obvious. Some of the cycles appear to have "missing peaks" since the oscilloscope digitizer did not happen to sample the input waveform when it was at a maximum.

A similar graph is shown in Figure 2, but in this case the sampling frequency has been increased to 20 kHz, which is almost ten times the frequency of the input waveform. The digitized approximation now appears to have about the same shape as the input waveform. Now each cycle is approximated by ten straight line segments, rather than just five as before.

There are, however, still some obvious distortions. Note, for example, the 4th peak from the left, which occurs near time $t = 1.5$ ms. The oscilloscope happened to sample the waveform on either side of the peak, but not at the peak itself. Therefore, when viewed on the oscilloscope screen, the peak will appear to be "flattened off" and slightly reduced in size relative to other peaks of the waveform. Evidently, in order to obtain a waveform that is displayed smoothly on the screen, it is necessary to have an oscilloscope sampling frequency that is *more* than ten times the frequency of the signal.

* Adapted from an article originally written by Bill Melton, Professor Emeritus, University of North Carolina, Charlotte

At low sampling frequencies it is easy to be *completely misled* by the digitized waveform displayed on the oscilloscope screen. Figure 3 shows the same 2200 Hz signal as before, but the sampling frequency has been reduced to 2 kHz. Note that the input waveform is sampled only about once each cycle, and the digitized waveform appears to be, at least approximately, a sinusoidal signal of much lower frequency than the input waveform! To avoid these kinds of errors, the sampling frequency must meet the requirement of the Nyquist theorem, which states that the sampling frequency must be *at least twice* the signal frequency.

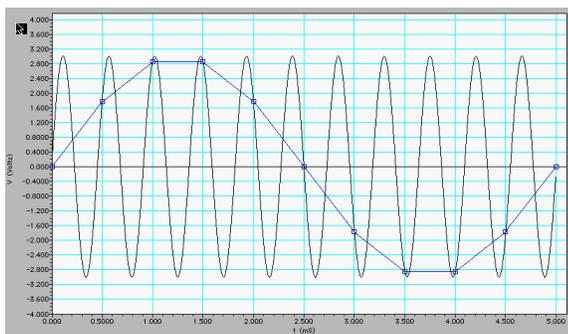


Figure 3. The missing cycles that result when a 2.2 kHz sinusoidal waveform is sampled at 2 kHz, which does not meet the Nyquist criterion

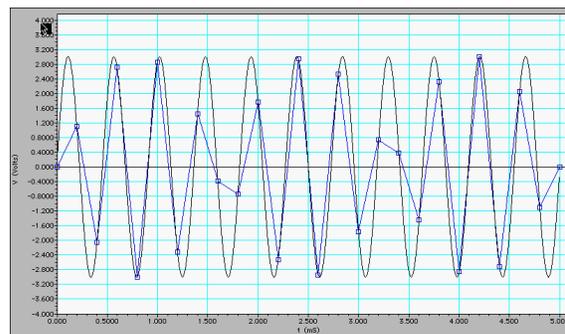


Figure 4. A 2.2 kHz sinusoidal waveform sampled at 5.0 kHz. There is significant distortion even though the sampling frequency meets the Nyquist criterion.

For comparison, in Figure 4 we show the 2200 Hz input waveform sampled at 5 kHz (time between samples is 0.2 ms). This sampling frequency meets the Nyquist criterion, which effectively means that the sampled waveform has no "missing cycles." However, it still looks greatly distorted. Based on the appearance of the sampled waveform in Figure 4, one might be tempted to conclude, quite incorrectly, that the input waveform exhibits beats.

So, what does all this mean with regard to using digital storage oscilloscopes for capturing signals such as those from the I or Q output of a TeachSpin NMR? First, it is obviously desirable to have a sampling frequency that is at least ten times the frequency of the signal you are studying. In using PS2, the proton precession frequency is near 21 MHz, but the beat signal used to determine if the system is on resonance is the difference of this frequency and the local oscillator frequency and this can be a few kHz or lower. Therefore, in this case, the sampling frequency should be 20 kHz or more. Specifications for digital oscilloscopes may claim maximum sampling frequencies of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of samples per second. But those specifications may be misleading.

Digital oscilloscopes vary, but, for many oscilloscopes, the oscilloscope takes only 1000 samples during one horizontal sweep. Assuming the screen is 10 divisions wide, that corresponds to as few as 100 samples per division. At a sweep speed of 5 ms/Div, 100 samples per division corresponds to a time interval of 0.05 ms between each sample, which is equivalent to a sample frequency of only 25 kHz, barely sufficient to produce a smooth digitized waveform. At 50 samples per division and a sweep speed of 20 ms/Div, the time between samples is 0.4 ms. The corresponding sample frequency is only 2.5 kHz, which does not even meet the Nyquist criterion. Therefore, with the PS2 example, severe sampling errors like that shown in Figure 3 can be expected when the oscilloscope sweep speed is 20 ms/div or slower.

There are two ways to check for aliasing. One is to change the 'scope sweep rate. If there is aliasing, the display will change. Another is to switch your 'scope from a sampling mode to a peak-detection mode. Think about how that would change Figures 3 and 4.

The examples that follow illustrate the effect of aliasing on the roughly 2 kHz signals of TeachSpin's Earth's Field NMR. The same rules apply, no matter what the frequency.

Figure 5 shows a photograph of an oscilloscope waveform obtained from a 125-ml sample of water. The frequency of the free precession signal being observed was 2.088 kHz. The oscilloscope sweep speed was 50 ms/Div. The waveform appears to be relatively smooth, with multiple samples per cycle. However, that is not the case. The oscilloscope was sampling at only 100 samples/division, which corresponds to a time interval between the samples of 0.5 ms and a sampling frequency of 2 kHz. Thus, the sample frequency is just slightly less than the frequency of the signal. The situation is similar to that in Figure 3. What appears in Figure 5 to be many closely-spaced samples on the same cycle are actually single samples taken on many successive cycles.

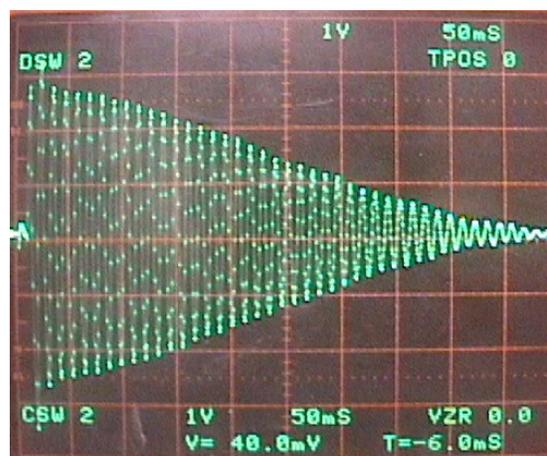


Figure 5. Apparently smooth free precession signal at a frequency of 2.088 kHz. The sample frequency was 2 kHz.

For a signal frequency of 2.088 kHz and a sample frequency of 2.000 kHz, the difference in frequencies (or beat frequency) is 88 Hz, which is the *apparent* frequency of the digitized waveform in Figure 5.

The waveform in Figure 6 shows an even more extreme example of aliasing. A 2.007 kHz signal was obtained from fluorine nuclei in a 25-gram sample of hexafluorobenzene, C_6F_6 . The oscilloscope sweep speed was 50 ms/Div, and the oscilloscope sample frequency was 2 kHz. Here, the signal and sample frequencies differ by only 7 Hz, which is identical to the apparent frequency of the sampled waveform observed on the oscilloscope screen.

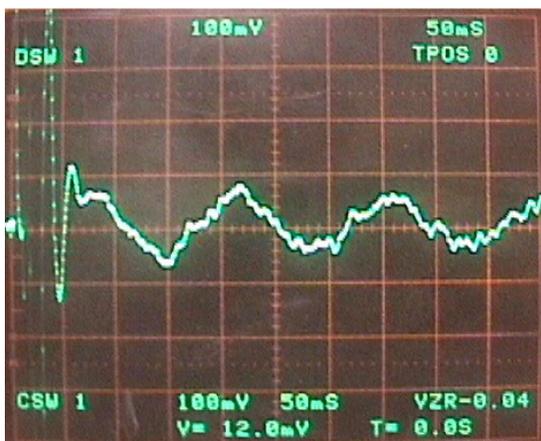


Figure 6. 2.007 kHz fluorine signal from a 25-gram sample of C_6F_6 . The oscilloscope sampling frequency was 2.000 kHz. The digitized waveform appears to have a frequency equal to the difference, 7 Hz.

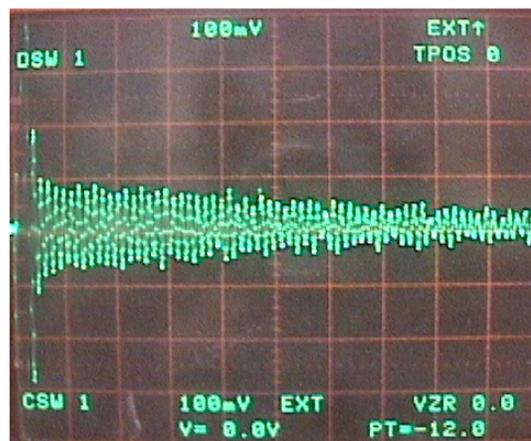


Fig. B7. Same as Figure 6, except the oscilloscope sampling frequency was reduced to 1.040 kHz. Since the oscilloscope displays 100 samples per division, the equivalent sweep speed is 96 ms/Div.

The same fluorine signal is shown in Figure 7, but there the sample frequency was reduced to 1.040 kHz. The time between samples was 0.96 ms, which is almost twice the period. The situation is similar to that shown in Figure 3, except the sample frequency was so low that the sampling process skipped whole cycles. Yet, the sampled waveform appears surprisingly smooth.

Only by taking the time to change your time scale, and thus the sampling frequency, several times and seeing that your trace remains sinusoidal, can you be sure you are seeing a ‘real signal’ and not an alias.