

TechTopics Topic:Circuit Breakers or Switches – Application Considerations

We are often asked to discuss the application considerations that favor the use of medium voltage circuit breakers, and those that favor the use of medium voltage fused load interrupter switches. This is one of those age-old questions, so this issue of TechTopics is devoted to it.

To compare the application of medium voltage circuit breakers and of load interrupter switches, we must understand the basic characteristics of each switching technology.

The table on the next page shows the major characteristics of medium voltage circuit breakers and load interrupter switches that influence the application. Of course, the table entries are generalized, and the information varies by the voltage and current ratings of the equipment. This is particularly true for interrupter switches, where the endurance capabilities vary greatly according to the ratings. However, the table is valid for an overall understanding.

From the data in the table, we make these observations:

- Medium voltage circuit breakers are favored when
 - Continuous load current is high
 - Central monitoring / control is needed; remote control is necessary
 - Switching is frequent; high endurance (1000's of operations) is needed
 - Process continuity is critical
 - Loads are concentrated

- Medium voltage fused load interrupter switches are favored when
 - Continuous load current is low
 - Central monitoring / control is not needed; manual control is acceptable or electrical operation is infrequent
 - Switching is infrequent; low endurance (150-500 operations, depending on rating) is acceptable
 - Process continuity is not critical
 - Loads are widely dispersed

In industrial applications, a medium voltage fused load interrupter switch is most frequently used as the primary disconnect for a load center substation transformer. A load interrupter switch is well suited to this application, as load currents are low, switching is infrequent, and remote control is not ordinarily needed.

Medium voltage metal-clad switchgear with drawout circuit breakers is suitable for main power distribution in a large installation, with each feeder circuit breaker feeding several load center substations, each having a fused load interrupter switch on the primary of the transformer. The circuit breakers are suitable for switching high currents, and for control from a remote location. Since the circuit breakers can switch short-circuit currents and be ready for immediate closing, they are suitable where process continuity is critical.

When applied and maintained properly, both medium voltage circuit breakers and load interrupter switches should provide decades of reliable service. Applied incorrectly, either can lead to major headaches.

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Characteristic	Circuit Breaker	Load Interrupter Switch
Continuous current	High (1200A, 2000A, 3000A, or 4000A)	Moderate (Usually 600A, but 1200A also available). Current is limited to a lower value by available fuses
Switching capability	Switch currents from very low (magnetizing) values to full system short-circuit current	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Switch currents from very low (magnetizing) values to continuous rating of switch (typically 600A or 1200A load break). Switch (alone) cannot interrupt fault currents. Fuses interrupt short-circuits
Endurance - mechanical	High (typically 10,000 operations) (see ANSI C37.06)	Low (250-500 operations for 15kV, 150-350 for 38kV) (see ANSI C37.22)
Endurance - electrical	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically 10,000 operations at rated continuous current for vacuum Typically 30-100 operations at full short-circuit rating for vacuum 	Low <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For 600A current switched, 5 operations at 38kV, 30 at 15kV, 50 at 4.76kV (see ANSI C37.22). Short-circuit endurance is not given in standards
Application limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not appropriate if very high endurance (100,000s of operations) is needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not suitable if high or very high endurance needed Not suitable for motors, capacitors, filters, reactors, furnaces
Operation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Electrically operated (manual operation for maintenance or emergency) Suitable for complex control schemes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manually operated (electrical operation available, but note low endurance) Not appropriate for complex control schemes
Overcurrent / Short-Circuit protection	Requires protective relays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fuses required Relay tripping not recommended due to limited interrupting capability of switch. (Must block tripping for currents above load break rating)
Remote operation	Well suited	If electrically operated, can be arranged for remote operation
Control power	Control power needed for relays, breaker operation, and heaters (if present)	Control power not required unless electrically operated, or for heaters
Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drawout, if metal-clad (C37.20.2) Stationary, if metal-enclosed (C37.20.3) 	Stationary
Space requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Larger enclosure NEC required workspace equal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smaller enclosure NEC required workspace equal
Purchase cost	Relatively high	Relatively low
Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medium (long maintenance intervals, need to clean insulation) Drawout feature allows maintenance of circuit breaker without main bus shutdown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low (simple mechanism, need to clean insulation, replace fuses) Main bus shutdown required for switch maintenance