

Operation of the Thermo QUANT'X X-Ray Fluorescence Spectrometer

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Thermo QUANT'X is an energy dispersive x-ray fluorescence spectrometer (EDXRF) used for non-destructive compositional analysis of solids and liquids ranging in atomic number from sodium to uranium. The instrument can operate under an air, helium, or vacuum atmosphere.

2 SCOPE

This document applies to personnel using the associated instrument(s)/equipment in support of metallurgy, anthropology, polymer, or general chemistry examinations. The operation of the Thermo QUANT'X EDXRF will follow procedures defined in METAL-410 and the specific parameters described below.

3 PRINCIPLE

The Thermo QUANT'X EDXRF uses an Rh-target x-ray tube to generate the incident x-ray beam and a Peltier-cooled silicon drift detector (SDD) to collect and measure photons emitted by the sample. These components are arranged in a bottom-up configuration so that specimens are placed face down over the stage portal for measurement. Instrument control and data analysis are performed using WinTrace software.

4 SPECIMENS

Any liquid or solid specimen can be analyzed on this instrument, provided the cover can be closed. Larger specimens may have to be sectioned to provide access to an area of interest to be analyzed. Although the stage portal is approximately 1½ inch in diameter, the portal does not have to be completely covered for qualitative measurement. Typically, a few grams of liquid or solid will provide satisfactory results. If quantitative results are desired, it is necessary to prepare the specimens so that they have a flat, smooth surface. In the case of fine powders or liquids, the thin support film (e.g., 2.5 mm Mylar) used to contain the material provides the required surface.

5 EQUIPMENT

- ThermoScientific ARL QUANT'X EDXRF
- Energy adjustment standard(s) such as "Thermo OFHC" or a copper reference material, purity $\geq 99\%$ Cu
- Reference materials of alloys similar to the type(s) under analysis for alloy grade determination
- Certified reference materials (CRMs) of alloys similar to the type(s) under analysis for elemental quantitation or establishing limit of detection (LOD)
- One inch diameter (or larger) plastic specimen cups
- Chemplex X-Ray Mylar (2.5 μm thick) or polypropylene film (6.3 μm thick) or similar
- Helium gas, purity $\geq 99.95\%$ He, optional

- “Excitation and Filter Guide” chart, provided by ThermoScientific

6 STANDARDS AND CONTROLS

The instrument energy adjustment routine is used to fine-tune the signal processor each day prior to being used for casework and constitutes a performance check. Initiation of the automated routine is described in the Basic Operation section below. The routine requires a pure copper reference material, such as the “Thermo OFHC” disc standard. A copy of the Energy Adjustment Report is kept with the instrument.

Reference materials are often used to demonstrate the discernment of major, minor, and trace elements in alloys similar to the specimen under the same measurement conditions. Quantitative analyses will be appropriately validated using CRMs.

7 SAMPLING

Refer to the specific case work technical procedure for appropriate sampling procedures.

For bulk analysis of small particulate matter (like soil or fines), the material must be mixed until it appears visually homogeneous before extracting a specimen.

8 PROCEDURE

8.1 Basic Operation

The basic operation from a powered-down condition consists of the following steps.

- A. Turn on computer and instrument. From a cold start, the red “Detector” light on the front of the instrument will blink until the detector has cooled sufficiently to operate, then the light will go off.
- B. Perform an Energy Adjustment. This semi-automated routine sets the pulse processor gain so that the detected X-rays appear at the correct energies.
 1. Position the “Thermo OFHC” or other pure copper disc for analysis.
 2. Open Acquisitions Manager and select “Analyze” > “Energy Adjustment”.
 3. The energy adjustment routine normally uses the parameters listed in Table 1 to optimize the fine gain at two time constants, 600ns and 1000ns. Note: Although both 600ns and 1000ns are optimized by the energy adjustment routine, only 1000ns is used for spectral acquisition.

Table 1: Typical Operating Parameters for Energy Adjustment Routine

Parameter	Value
Line Energy	8.041 keV
Filter	Pd Medium
Voltage	20kV
Current	Auto
Acquisition Range	20keV
Spinner	OFF

4. Select “OK” to start the energy adjustment routine. The software self-adjusts the current to achieve an appropriate dead time of 30-59%.
5. Select the Cu K α peak when prompted. This prompt will occur twice, once for each time constant.
6. Upon successful completion, the Fine Gain Adjustment Report appears with diagnostic information. Record the results of the energy adjustment (pass/fail) in the instrument log accompanying the instrument.
7. Retain the report in the logbook so that it is available for system performance diagnostics.
8. Review the report and compare it to previous energy adjustment results:
 - i. Initial and final fine gain settings should change by no more than 100 on a weekly basis.
 - ii. FWHM should not exceed 169 eV at either time constant.
 - iii. Peak Count Rate (cps/mA): This indicator of x-ray tube performance should be compared with previous values. A downward trend might be a sign of normal x-ray tube aging. Non-uniform variation greater than ~20% day-to-day might signify stability problems.
 - iv. If any of the above conditions is unacceptable, consult a service representative.
9. If the energy adjustment is unsuccessful, perform the routine again. If repeated failure of the energy adjustment occurs, consult a service representative.

8.2 General Analysis

- A. Place the specimen on the stage face down over the stage portal. The surface to be analyzed should be flush with the stage surface, although the portal need not be completely covered for qualitative analysis. Center the area to be analyzed over the center of the hole. No part of the specimen should ever protrude down into the portal.
- B. Program the run by opening a qualitative or quantitative “tray list” (Qualitative Analysis or Quantitative Analysis sections) and selecting the parameters for each specimen and condition to be run.
 1. To run one specimen at multiple analysis conditions, enter the identical specimen ID on additional lines, selecting the new desired condition for each.
 2. To measure multiple specimens under the same analysis condition, enter the different specimen IDs on each line, selecting the same condition. Altering a condition that appears more than once in a tray list will alter all instances of that condition. As the analysis proceeds, the instrument will prompt for the required specimen change.
 3. Define each operating condition. Optimum x-ray tube voltage(s) and mode of irradiation (filter type or unfiltered) depend on the specimen composition and the objective of the analysis. Combinations that typically generate good intensities for specific elements are suggested on the “Excitation Filter Guide” provided by the manufacturer. However, since matrix interactions can be severe, the choice of the optimal conditions for a given analysis may deviate from these recommendations. The tube current is dictated primarily by the need to have a sufficient count rate to collect a spectrum, corresponding to deadtime of ~50% (30-59%), and is automatically adjusted by the instrument control software.
 4. Select the appropriate measurement atmospheric condition: air, helium, or vacuum. (Air is the default setting for each standard condition.)
- C. Identify the peaks present in the spectrum using the WinTrace Spectrum Viewer program. Refer to METAL-410 for more details regarding peak identification.
 1. The Auto Peak Identification routine is activated by the thumbprint icon. Software-generated identifications must be interpreted by an experienced operator to prevent misidentification of peaks.
 - i. The interactive periodic table (found under “Tools” > “Peak Identification” > “Setup”) can be used to adjust the sensitivity of the auto-labeling routine and to force or remove element labels.

- ii. Double-clicking on an element label on the spectrum display will remove an individual peak label without blocking the entire line series for that element.
2. The “MLK” function overlays sets of characteristic emission lines on the spectrum to aid in x-ray peak identification.
- i. Use Ctrl + right/left arrow keys to step through the sets of characteristic emissions.
 - ii. Double-click on an emission line to apply a label to that line.

8.3 Qualitative Analysis

- A. Spectra for qualitative analysis are collected in WinTrace “Acquisitions Manager” using a Qualitative Tray List. Before acquisition, be sure to specify the location the spectra will be saved by selecting “Edit” > “Spectrum Location”.
- B. To begin acquisition, select the “Go” icon.
- C. After data collection, the x-ray tube automatically powers down. The Peltier detector requires electricity for cooling. As long as the instrument remains plugged in, power is applied to the cooling circuit, even if the power switch is turned off.
- D. Use the Auto Peak Identification (thumbprint) and “MLK” icons to aid in x-ray peak identification. Hold down the Control key and press an Arrow key, < or >, to change the element for which the MLK lines are shown.
- E. Spectra can be viewed, annotated, and overlaid in the WinTrace “Spectrum Viewer” application.
- F. A copy of the spectrum, with peaks labeled and acquisition conditions listed, will be retained in the case notes.

8.4 Quantitative Analysis

8.4.1 Technique Development

The spectra acquired from a specimen can be processed to yield weight concentrations of the elements detected. If numerical compositional data is to be reported, validation must be performed on the same instrument under the same operating conditions using CRMs with a matrix similar to that of the specimen of interest. For quantitative analysis, the Thermo QUANT’X EDXRF requires defining a technique referred to as a “Method” in the WinTrace software. This includes acquisition of the unknown spectra, acquisition of CRM spectra, acquisition of peak profiles for pure elements, and selection of a mode of analysis.

- A. Determine favorable analysis conditions for each element of interest empirically by running qualitative analyses and/or by using the “Excitation Filter Guide”.

- B. Pure element peak profiles are collected in WinTrace “Acquisitions Manager” using a Reference Tray List. Before acquisition, be sure to specify the location the spectra will be saved by selecting “Edit” > “Spectrum Location”. These spectra will later be imported into the WinTrace “Method Explorer” software. If “L” series spectral lines are of interest for quantitation, the conditions for acquisition of pure element peak profiles must be identical to those used to collect the unknown spectra. If only “K” series spectral lines will be analyzed, the acquisition conditions need not match.
- C. CRM spectra can be collected in WinTrace “Acquisitions Manager” using a Reference Tray List or can be collected directly into the defined “Method”. If collecting in “Acquisitions Manager” before acquisition, be sure to specify the location the spectra will be saved by selecting “Edit” > “Spectrum Location”. These spectra will later be imported into the chosen Method.
- D. Spectra for quantitative analysis of unknown specimens can be collected in WinTrace “Acquisitions Manager” using a Quantitative Tray List or can be collected directly into the defined “Method”. Before acquisition, be sure to specify the location the spectra will be saved by selecting “Edit” > “Spectrum Location”. These spectra will later be imported into the selected “Method”.

8.4.2 Analysis

The instrument WinTrace “Method Explorer” software contains analysis techniques for quantitative analysis. Two of these are described briefly below. Select the analysis technique by selecting “File” > “Settings”.

- A. “Fundamentals Parameters (alpha)” is a fundamental parameters-based quantitation routine. This technique requires only a limited number of standards to generate correlation curves for the analytes of interest. It provides quantitative analysis over a wide range of concentrations and can be used with CRMs that are dissimilar from the evidentiary materials. The resulting calculated concentrations can be displayed as absolute or normalized values.
- B. “Intensity Correction” is an empirical technique that uses a suite of CRMs to generate correlation curves. The CRMs must be similar in matrix to the unknown in order to account for matrix interactions. This analysis requires that the CRMs bracket the compositions of the analytes of interest in the unknown.
- C. Each analysis technique offers different options for spectrum processing. Typically, “Force through zero” should be selected (compensation for background is included in the software routine). The default setting for spectrum processing for Fundamental Parameters – Alpha is “XML” for every element. If a large peak dwarfs a smaller adjacent peak, setting the spectrum processing mode for the element with the larger peak to “Derivative” can improve the analysis of the smaller peak.

- D. Once all of the data are entered, the spectra are collected, and the analysis parameters are chosen, select “Calibrate” to generate the correlation curve, then select a sample list to “Analyze” using the correlation curve. Results from the correlation and analysis are saved in the defined “Method”. These results can be exported in .csv format to a database program like Excel for statistical evaluation. If quantitative data are to be reported, the “Calibration” and “Analysis” reports will be retained in validation records and in the case file.

9 INSTRUMENTAL CONDITIONS

- A. The “Excitation and Filter Guide” chart, provided by ThermoScientific, contains recommendations for analysis conditions that have been found to be useful for the preliminary screening of materials. If the specimen is a liquid or a vacuum-sensitive material, choose a helium or air atmosphere as appropriate to the specimen and the analysis objectives. Instrumental conditions can be adjusted at the discretion of the analyst to optimize the analyses.
- B. Acquisition times will depend on the conditions chosen and the specimen area exposed to the incident beam to acquire sufficient counts for analysis.
- C. Two x-ray collimators are available, 1.0 mm and 8.8 mm. These are used to limit the x-ray beam size incident on the specimen. For routine operation, the 8.8 mm filter wheel collimator is typically used.

10 CALCULATIONS

See METAL-410 for applicable calculations.

11 ACCEPTANCE CRITERIA

11.1 Instrumental Performance

During analysis, energy adjustment of the instrument will be undertaken whenever the measured x-ray peak positions differ by more than 0.05 keV from their theoretical positions.

11.2 Spectral Analysis

General decision criteria for peak identification, spectral comparison and quantitative EDXRF analysis are described in METAL-410. Additional considerations particular to this instrument are:

- A. The Thermo QUANT’X EDXRF generates a low intensity system peak at the energy of aluminum $K\alpha$ that interferes with identifying minor amounts of aluminum in alloys.
- B. The on-board peak identification software does not present marker lines for escape peaks* or sum peaks. This requires the operator to calculate and identify these peaks associated with the major constituents of a specimen. (*Labels generated by the peak ID routine can identify the general vicinity of escape peaks.)

12 MEASUREMENT UNCERTAINTY

Typically, the Thermo QUANT'X EDXRF is not used for quantitative analysis. In the event that it is necessary to estimate the measurement uncertainty of an instrumental result, it will be done in accord with CHEM-100.

13 LIMITATIONS

- A. METAL-410 contains general limitations of compositional measurement by x-ray fluorescence spectrometry.
- B. Specimens of adequate size (usually a few grams) are required for optimal results. Where only smaller specimens are available, the use of a microspot EDXRF is recommended.
- C. Aluminum may not be able to be detected as a minor constituent in materials because the Thermo QUANT'X EDXRF generates a low intensity system peak at the energy of aluminum $K\alpha$.

14 SAFETY

- A. The Thermo QUANT'X EDXRF produces x-rays. Wear an x-ray film badge or dosimeter when operating this instrument. The instrument has a protective enclosure with internal safety interlocks to prevent inadvertent x-ray radiation exposure. Never bypass or disable the safety interlocks on this instrument.
- B. The detector and tube windows are comprised of beryllium and are extremely delicate. In the event of damage to a window, the beryllium dust created could pose an acute health hazard. If this occurs, seal the chamber, and seek assistance from the Laboratory Health and Safety Group.

15 REFERENCES

- CHEM-100, Chemistry Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Laboratory Division, latest revision
- METAL-410, Chemistry Unit, latest revision

16 REVISION HISTORY

Revision	Issued	Changes
06	08/01/2022	Revised to comply with new formatting requirements. Informational references removed.
07	02/01/2023	Revised operational instructions and hardware descriptions for current instrument model.