RELAY & RELAY DRIVER

A relay is an **electrically operated switch**. Current flowing through the coil of the relay creates a magnetic field which attracts a lever and changes the switch contacts. The coil current can be on or off so relays have two switch positions and they are **double throw** (**changeover**) switches.

Relays allow one circuit to switch a second circuit which can be completely separate from the first. For example a low voltage battery circuit can use a relay to switch a 230V AC mains circuit. There is no electrical connection inside the relay between the two circuits; the link is magnetic and mechanical.

The coil of a relay passes a relatively large current, typically 30mA for a 12V relay, but it can be as much as 100mA for relays designed to operate from lower voltages. Most ICs (chips) cannot provide this current and a transistor is usually used to amplify the small IC current to the larger value required for the relay coil. The maximum output current for the popular 555 timer IC is 200mA so these devices can supply relay coils directly without amplification.

Relays are usually SPDT or DPDT but they can have many more sets of switch contacts, for example relays with 4 sets of changeover contacts are readily available. For further information about switch contacts and the terms used to describe them please see the page on switches.

Most relays are designed for PCB mounting but you can solder wires directly to the pins providing you take care to avoid melting the plastic case of the relay.

The supplier's catalogue should show you the relay's connections. The coil will be obvious and it may be connected either way round. Relay coils produce brief high voltage 'spikes' when they are switched off and this can destroy transistors and ICs in the circuit. To prevent damage you must connect a protection diode across the relay coil.

The animated picture shows a working relay with its coil and switch contacts. You can see a lever on the left being attracted by magnetism when the coil is switched on. This lever moves the switch contacts. There is one set of contacts (SPDT) in the foreground and another behind them, making the relay DPDT.

The relay's switch connections are usually labeled COM, NC and NO:

- **COM** = Common, always connect to this, it is the moving part of the switch.
- **NC** = Normally Closed, COM is connected to this when the relay coil is **off**.
- **NO** = Normally Open, COM is connected to this when the relay coil is **on**.
- Connect to COM and NO if you want the switched circuit to be **on when the relay coil is on**.
- Connect to COM and NC if you want the switched circuit to be **on when the relay coil is off**.
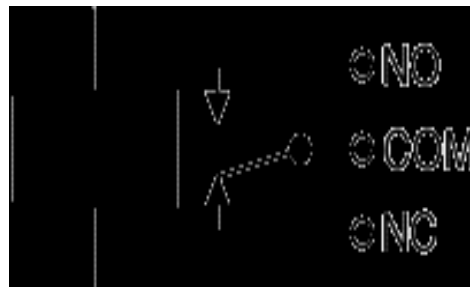
Protection diodes for relays

Transistors and ICs must be protected from the brief high voltage produced when a relay coil is switched off. The diagram shows how a signal diode (e.g. 1N4148) is connected 'backwards' across the relay coil to provide this protection.
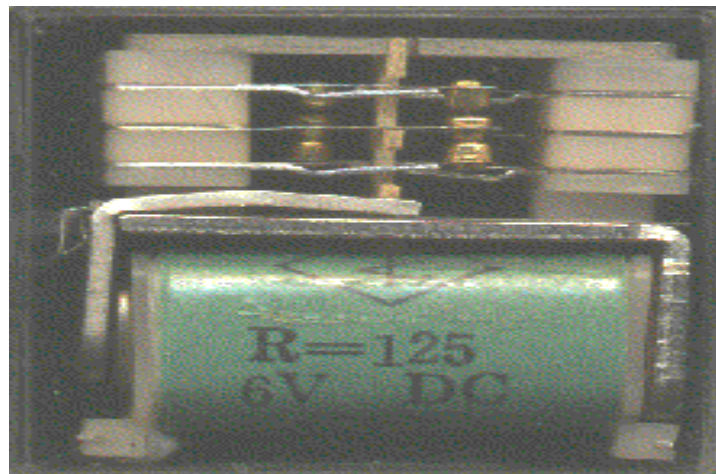
Current flowing through a relay coil creates a magnetic field which collapses suddenly when the current is switched off. The sudden collapse of the magnetic field induces a brief high voltage across the relay coil which is very likely to damage transistors and ICs. The protection diode allows the induced voltage to drive a brief current through the coil (and diode) so the magnetic field dies away quickly rather than instantly. This prevents the induced voltage becoming high enough to cause damage to transistors and ICs.
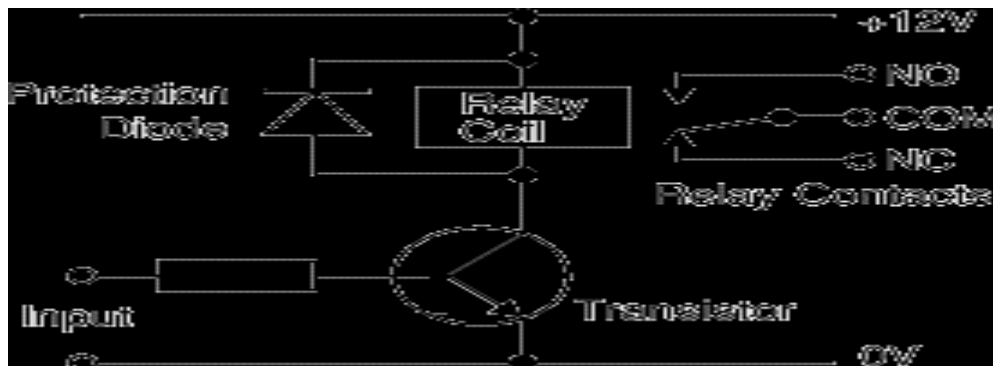
Relays and transistors compared

Like relays, transistors can be used as an electrically operated switch. For switching small DC currents (< 1A) at low voltage they are usually a better choice than a relay. However transistors cannot switch AC or high voltages (such as mains electricity) and they are not usually a good choice for switching large currents (> 5A). In these cases a relay will be needed, but note that a low power transistor may still be needed to switch the current for the relay's coil! The main advantages and disadvantages of relays are listed below:

Advantages of relays:

- Relays can switch **AC and DC**, transistors can only switch DC.
- Relays can switch **high voltages**, transistors cannot.
- Relays are a better choice for switching **large currents** (> 5A).
- Relays can switch **many contacts** at once.

Disadvantages of relays:

- Relays are **bulkier** than transistors for switching small currents.
- Relays **cannot switch rapidly** (except reed relays), transistors can switch many times per second.
- Relays **use more power** due to the current flowing through their coil.
- Relays **require more current than many ICs can provide**, so a low power transistor may be needed to switch the current for the relay's coil.