
Nanotechnologies — Analysis of nano-objects using asymmetrical-flow and centrifugal field-flow fractionation

Nanotechnologies — Analyse des nano-objets par fractionnement flux asymétrique et flux force centrifuge

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Contents

	Page
Foreword	v
Introduction	vi
1 Scope	1
2 Normative references	1
3 Terms and definitions	1
4 Symbols and abbreviated terms	7
5 Principles of operation	8
5.1 Field-flow fractionation (General)	8
5.2 Specific applications by applied field	10
5.2.1 Flow field	10
5.2.2 Centrifugal field	11
6 Method development for AF4	13
6.1 General	13
6.2 Sample specifications	14
6.3 Mobile phase specifications	14
6.4 Fractionation	15
6.4.1 Channel and membrane selection	15
6.4.2 Injection and relaxation	17
6.4.3 Optimizing flow conditions	18
6.4.4 Elution programme	18
6.4.5 Using FFF theory to select initial flow settings	19
7 Method development for CF3	19
7.1 General	19
7.2 Choice of mobile phase	20
7.3 Field strength selection	20
7.4 Field decay programme	20
7.5 Channel flow rate selection	21
7.6 Calculation of the relaxation time	21
7.7 Calculation of sample injection delay	21
8 Analysis of nano-objects	21
8.1 General	21
8.2 Online size analysis	22
8.3 Online concentration analysis	23
8.3.1 General	23
8.3.2 Mass-based methods	23
8.3.3 Number-based methods	24
8.4 Online material identification or composition	25
8.5 Off-line analysis (Fraction collection)	26
9 Qualification, performance criteria and measurement uncertainty	26
9.1 System qualification and quality control	26
9.1.1 Basic system qualification	26
9.1.2 Focusing performance	27
9.1.3 Flow rate of the carrier liquid	28
9.1.4 Separation field	28
9.2 Method performance criteria	28
9.2.1 Recovery	28
9.2.2 Selectivity	29
9.2.3 Retention	29
9.2.4 Resolution	29
9.3 Method precision and measurement uncertainty	29

10	General procedures for measurement of samples	30
10.1	General	30
10.2	Calibration of retention time for online size analysis	30
10.2.1	Calibration of the AF4 channel	30
10.2.2	Calibration of AF4 retention time for online size measurements	31
10.3	AF4 general measurement procedure	31
10.4	CF3 general measurement procedure	32
11	Test report	33
11.1	General	33
11.2	Apparatus and measurement parameters	33
11.2.1	AF4 recording/reporting specifications	33
11.2.2	CF3 recording/reporting specifications	34
11.3	Reporting test results	34
	Bibliography	35

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Foreword

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Introduction

The capacity to isolate and analyse diverse populations of nano-objects and their agglomerates or aggregates, often suspended in, or extracted from, complex matrices, is critical for applications ranging from materials discovery and nanomanufacturing to regulatory oversight and environmental risk assessment. Furthermore, the ability to characterize these analytes with minimal perturbation of their natural or native state is highly desirable. The list of available techniques capable of achieving such objectives is relatively short, and while all techniques have advantages and disadvantages, and no single technique is solely adequate or appropriate for all possible applications and materials, a group of related separation techniques known collectively as field-flow fractionation (FFF), conceptually proposed by J. Calvin Giddings in 1966[1], offers many advantages for nanotechnology applications. In FFF, the analyte, suspended in a liquid medium, is fractionated by the application of a field (e.g. flow, centrifugal, electric, thermal-gradient, magnetic) perpendicular to the direction of flow of the analyte and mobile phase eluting through a thin defined channel. Separation occurs when the analyte responds to the applied field, such that populations with different response sensitivities reach equilibrium positions (i.e. in equilibrium with diffusional forces) higher or lower in the laminar flow streamlines perpendicular to channel flow, thus eluting differentially.

Among the FFF variants, asymmetrical flow FFF (variously abbreviated in the literature as AF4, A4F, AFFFF, AfFFF or AsFFFF) and centrifugal FFF (abbreviated as CF3, also called sedimentation FFF and abbreviated as SdFFF), are available commercially and have been most widely adopted in the nanotechnology field (for convenience and simplicity, the abbreviations AF4 and CF3 are used throughout this document). AF4 is arguably the most versatile technique with respect to the wide range of applications, materials and particle sizes to which it has been applied. Symmetrical flow FFF (fFFF), the original “flow-based” technique as first described in 1976[2], has been supplanted commercially by AF4, introduced in 1987[3], due to several advantages, including a simpler channel design, the ability to visualize the sample through a transparent top channel wall, and reduced analyte band width. The theory and application of CF3 as it is presently applied was described by Giddings and coworkers in 1974[4], although a centrifugal field-based FFF system was first developed and tested independently by Berg and Purcell in 1967[5]. Other FFF field variants, such as thermal, electrical and magnetic, provide unique capabilities, but have been limited in the scope of their applications vis-à-vis nanotechnology or commercial availability.

Where FFF was once predominantly the domain of specialists, these instruments are now commonly and increasingly utilized in government, industry and academic laboratories as part of the nano-characterization toolbox. Two factors are driving this increase in nanotechnology utilization: maturation of commercial instrumentation and versatility with respect to coupling a wide range of detectors to FFF systems. In the latter case, recent developments have led to the use of highly sensitive elemental detectors (e.g. inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometer or ICP-MS), which offer enhanced characterization and quantification for many materials. Additionally, traditional concentration or sizing detectors, such as ultraviolet-visible (UV-Vis) absorbance, fluorescence, multi-angle light scattering (MALS) and dynamic light scattering (DLS), yield online data for eluting populations, and theoretically provide more accurate information than obtainable using off-line measurements of unfractionated polydisperse systems. The measured retention time of an eluting peak can also be used to determine the hydrodynamic size by AF4 based on theoretical relationships or calibration with a known size standard. CF3 has the unique capacity to rapidly separate species of the same size but differing in density.

Although FFF based techniques have the capacity to separate and characterize analytes over an extremely broad size range, from about 1 nm up to tens of micrometers, this document focuses primarily on materials in the nanoscale regime and their associative structures. The basic underlying principles, experimental approach, and hardware described here can be more broadly applied.

While this specification includes the most common online detection schemes for nano-object analysis, other less common forms of detection have been utilized or reported in the literature, including differential refractometry (primarily used for macromolecular analysis), particle tracking analysis, graphite furnace atomic absorption spectrometry, single particle ICP-MS, and small-angle X-ray