Actuator

An **actuator** is a mechanical device for moving or controlling a mechanism or system. It is operated by a source of energy, usually in the form of an electric current, hydraulic fluid pressure or pneumatic pressure, and converts that energy into some kind of motion.

An actuator is something that converts energy into motion. It can also be used to apply a force. An actuator typically is a mechanical device that takes energy, usually created by air, electricity, or liquid, and converts that into some kind of motion. That motion can be anything from blocking to clamping to ejecting. Actuators are typically used in manufacturing or industrial applications and may be used in things like motors, pumps, switches, and valves.

Perhaps the most common type of actuator is powered by air — the pneumatic cylinder, also known as the air cylinder. Air cylinders are air-tight cylinders, typically made from metal, that use the energy of compressed air to move a piston. Air cylinders are most commonly used in manufacturing and assembly processes. Grippers, which are used in robotics, use actuators driven by compressed air to work much like human fingers.

Actuators can also be powered by electricity or hydraulics. Much like there are air cylinders, there are also electric cylinders and hydraulic cylinders where the cylinder converts electricity or hydraulics into motion. Hydraulic cylinders are often used in certain types of vehicles.

Many actuators have more than one type of power source. Solenoid valves, for example, can be powered by air *and* electricity. Electricity powers the solenoid, and the solenoid, powered by air, actuates the valve. Alternatively, the solenoid can be powered by hydraulics and electricity.

Actuators can create a linear motion, rotary motion, or oscillatory motion. That is, they can create motion in one direction, in a circular motion, or in opposite directions at regular intervals. Hydraulic and air cylinders can be classified as single acting, meaning that the energy source causes movement in one direction and a spring is used for the other direction. Alternatively, these cylinders can be double acting cylinders, meaning the energy is used in two directions.

While actuators are typically discussed in terms of mechanical implements, muscles are sometimes given as an example of an actuator. Energy (e.g., created by eating carbohydrates) is converted by the muscle (i.e., the actuator) into motion (e.g., kicking a ball).

Examples and applications

- Mechanical actuators operate by conversion of rotary motion into linear motion, or vice versa. Conversion is commonly made via a few simple types of mechanism including:

- **Screw**: Screw jack, ball screw and roller screw actuators all operate on the principle of the simple machine known as the screw. By rotating the actuator's nut, the screw shaft moves in a line. By moving the screw shaft, the nut rotates. Etc.

- **Wheel and axle**: Hoist, winch, rack and pinion, chain drive, belt drive, rigid chain and rigid belt actuators operate on the principle of the wheel and axle. By rotating a wheel/axle (e.g. drum, gear, pulley or shaft) a linear member (e.g. cable, rack, chain or belt) moves. By moving the linear member, the wheel/axle rotates.[2]

- In engineering, actuators are frequently used as mechanisms to introduce motion, or to clamp an object so as to prevent motion. In electronic engineering, actuators are a subdivision of transducers. They are devices which transform an input signal (mainly an electrical signal) into motion. Specific examples include: electrical motors, pneumatic actuators, hydraulic actuators, linear actuators, comb drive, piezoelectric actuators and amplified piezoelectric actuators, thermal bimorphs, micromirror devices and electroactive polymers.

- Motors are mostly used when circular motions are needed, but can also be used for linear applications by transforming circular to linear motion with a bolt and screw transducer. On the other hand, some actuators are intrinsically linear, such as piezoelectric actuators.

Thermodynamic efficiency

The efficiency of an actuator is a standard tool used to calculate or estimate the usefulness of any actuating mechanism. It is a dimensionless quantity which is generally lower than 1 expressing the energy conversion factor. For better explanation see Thermodynamic efficiency. Most of the wasted energy (due to friction, magnetic losses, eddy currents etc.) is thermally dissipated.

$$\varepsilon = \frac{\text{useful work}}{\text{spent energy}} = \frac{\text{output energy}}{\text{input energy}}$$