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Reduced Graphene Oxide in Electronics: A Comprehensive Review of Synthesis, Properties, and Diode Applications

N. K. Misal*, Shrikant H. Nimkar, R. D. Kalskar

Department of Physics, Shri Shivaji Arts, Commerce & Science College, Akot and
Department of Physics, Late B. S. Arts, Prof. N. G. Science & A. G. Commerce College, Sakharkherda
Department of Physics, Shri Shivaji Arts, Commerce & Science College, Akot
Department of Physics, Shri Shivaji Arts, Commerce & Science College, Akot

ABSTRACT: Reduced graphene oxide (rGO) is a versatile material with exceptional electrical conductivity, mechanical strength, and tunable semiconducting properties, making it ideal for advanced electronic devices such as diodes. Synthesized by chemically or thermally reducing graphene oxide, rGO overcomes the limitations of pristine graphene, including the lack of a band gap. Various reduction methods chemical, thermal, electrochemical, and photochemical directly influence rGO's structural and electronic qualities, critical for device performance. rGO-based diodes, including Schottky and p-n junction types, benefit from improved charge transport and rectification. Advanced characterization techniques ensure understanding and optimization of these materials. Beyond electronics, rGO's properties enable applications in flexible electronics, energy storage, composites, coatings, and biomedical fields. Future progress hinges on controlled synthesis, scalable fabrication, and integration with other materials for next-generation devices.

KEYWORDS: Reduced Graphene Oxide (rGO), Pristine Graphene, Schottky Diode, Flexible Electronics, P-N Junction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Graphene and its derivatives, particularly reduced graphene oxide (rGO), have garnered significant scientific interest due to their exceptional electrical, optical, mechanical, and thermal properties [1]. Its unique two-dimensional structure and tunable electronic characteristics make it an excellent candidate for next-generation electronic devices, especially in the diode applications [2]. This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the synthesis methods, fabrication techniques, and emerging trends of reduced graphene oxide (rGO) for diode applications, highlighting the critical role of material properties in device performance. The remarkable electronic properties of graphene, including its ultrahigh electron mobility, enable efficient charge transfer, making it an ideal component for advanced diode structures [2, 3]. Despite these advantages, the absence of a bandgap in pristine graphene limits its direct application in semiconductor devices, necessitating modifications such as doping to induce semiconducting properties [4]. There are two steps to making rGO: first, graphite is oxidized to get Graphene Oxide (GO), and then GO is reduced to partially restore the graphitic structure [5]. GO is a non-conductive, water-loving material that is full of oxygen-containing groups (such epoxides, hydroxyls, carbonyls, and carboxylic acids) that break up the sp^2 carbon network. The reduction step, which can be chemical, thermal, or electrochemical, is meant to get rid of these oxygen groups. This makes the GO conductive again and turns it into semiconducting or semi-metallic rGO [6]. The expanding literature on Reduced Graphene Oxide (rGO) covers a wide range of topics, from basic chemical research to its use in electronics, energy storage, composites, and sensors. Although many great reviews have talked about how to make rGO and how to use it in general [5, 7, 8], there is a clear gap in systematically linking the stages of its lifecycle that are very dependent on each other: from the first step of making GO to the important step of reducing it to the final performance in a specific electronic device.

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II. THE STARTING POINT: SYNTHESIS OF GRAPHENE OXIDE (GO)

1) A. Brodie's Method: The Historical Beginning

British chemist Benjamin C. Brodie pioneered graphene oxide in the 19th century. The "atomic weight of graphite" was determined by Brodie's chemical reactivity in 1859 [9]. His research at Oxford produced the first systematic oxidation of graphite, which he named "graphon," "graphitic acid," or "carbonic acid."

The Brodie method was rigorous and tedious. He oxidized pure graphite with $KClO_3$ in fuming nitric acid for a long time. The 3 to 4 day response in a sealed glass tube at 60°C was severe. Brodie repeated the process three or four times on the same material with new oxidizing mixture to get high oxidation [9]. The chemical change was significant. The powerful oxidants added oxygen-containing functional groups (mostly hydroxyl and epoxide) between graphene layers, greatly increasing interlayer gap and changing the material's fundamental characteristics. The pale, yellow-brown graphitic oxide could be disseminated in water or basic solutions by gentle sonication, exfoliating it into graphene oxide sheets.

B. Staudenmaier's Method: A Step towards Practicality and its Inherent Limitations

Chemist L. Staudenmaier built on Brodie's work to improve the oxidation process for practical and efficient high oxidation. He significantly modified Brodie's protocol in 1898 to eliminate one of its main inefficiencies [10]. Staudenmaier may be considered a "chlorate-based" route like Brodie's, but its methodological adjustment was ground-breaking. Staudenmaier's method involved adding potassium chlorate ($KClO_3$) gradually to a graphite reaction mixture in a concentrated sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4) and fuming nitric acid (HNO_3) solution, instead of multiple treatments over several days. This reaction usually took several days in one vessel.

C. Hummers' Method and its Modern Modifications: The Contemporary Standard

In 1958, William S. Hummers Jr. and Richard E. Offeman's work changed the way Graphene Oxide was made. Their goal was to come up with a better, safer, and faster way than the Brodie and Staudenmaier procedures. The "Hummers' Method," as it came to be called, solved the biggest problem with earlier methods, which was the use of explosive potassium chlorate. Since then, it has become the only way to make GO in both academic and industrial contexts. [11]. To solve these problems, D. C. Marcano and others made an important change in 2010 that is sometimes called the "Improved Hummers' Method" [12]. This method makes two important changes Getting rid of sodium nitrate ($NaNO_3$): This gets rid of the source of hazardous nitrogen oxide emissions, which makes the process safer and better for the environment. Changed Reaction Stoichiometry and Phasing: The approach employs a bigger ratio of $KMnO_4$ to graphite and does the reaction in a 9:1 combination of H_2SO_4 and H_3PO_4.

2) III. THE TRANSFORMATION: REDUCTION TECHNIQUES TO OBTAINED RGO

Reducing Graphene Oxide is crucial for restoring the conjugated sp² carbon network and restoring electrical conductivity. However, the reduction procedure greatly affects the rGO's chemical composition, defect density, and electrical characteristics, allowing strategic tailoring based on the application.

A. Chemical Reduction Methods

Chemical reduction is the most widely used technique due to its simplicity and scalability. Common reducing agents include: Strong Reductants (High Conductivity, More Defects) like Hydrazine hydrate: Effective but toxic [13] and Sodium borohydride ($NaBH_4$): Less hazardous but requires thermal assistance [14]. This method is highly effective, typically achieving a high C/O ratio (often >10) and electrical conductivities in the range of 10^2 to 10^4 S/m. It was the first method to demonstrate the restoration of significant electrical conductivity in rGO films [15]. Ascorbic acid (Vitamin C): Eco-friendly alternative with moderate reduction efficiency [16]. There is a direct trade-off between eco-friendliness and ultimate electronic quality. While the best "green" agents like HI can achieve conductivities comparable to hydrazine, many others (like ascorbic acid and plant extracts) typically produce rGO with lower C/O ratios and conductivities.

B. Thermal Reduction

Annealing GO at high temperatures (500–1000°C) in inert atmospheres removes oxygen functional groups [17]. Yields highly conductive rGO but may introduce defects. This is one of the most effective methods for achieving a high C/O ratio (can exceed 12) and good electrical conductivity, often in the range of 10^3 to 10^4 S/m. It is a solvent-free, "clean" process that doesn't involve chemical contaminants.

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C. Electrochemical Reduction

This method involves applying a controlled potential or current to a GO film coated on an electrode (working electrode) immersed in an electrolyte. Reduction occurs via electron transfer from the electrode to the GO sheet [18]. Applied potential reduces GO films directly on electrodes [19]. The advantages of this method are controlled reduction, minimal impurities.

D. Photochemical and Laser Reduction

This technique uses light energy, typically from a laser or UV lamp, to locally reduce GO. UV photoreduction works by photon-induced cleavage of C–O bonds. Laser scribing, often using an infrared laser in a standard Light Scribe DVD drive, uses photothermal energy to heat and reduce GO [20]. UV or laser irradiation induces localized reduction [21]. and useful for patterned rGO structures in flexible electronics.

Table: Comparison of Major Reduction Methods for rGO Synthesis

Reduction Method	Typical C/O Ratio	Electrical Conductivity (S/m)	Key Advantages	Major Disadvantages
Chemical (Strong)	8 - 15	10^2 - 10^4	• High conductivity • Effective for bulk solutions	• Highly toxic reagents (e.g., hydrazine) • Introduces heteroatom doping (N) • Can create new carbon defects
Chemical (Green/Mild)	5 - 12	10^1 - 10^3	• Environmentally friendly • Biocompatible • Good for composites	• Generally lower conductivity • Incomplete reduction (more residual O)
Thermal Annealing	10 - 20	10^3 - 10^4	• High C/O ratio & conductivity • Solvent-free, no chemical residues	• Energy-intensive • Creates topological defects (vacancies) • Not suitable for flexible substrates
Photoreduction / Laser Scribing	6 - 10 (localized)	10^2 - 10^3 (in patterns)	**• Mask less, direct patterning** • Compatible with flexible electronics • Rapid processing	• Limited to surface reduction • Not for bulk powder production • Resolution limited by laser spot size
Electrochemical	7 - 12	10^2 - 10^3	**• Precise, tunable reduction** • Ambient conditions • Green process (no chemicals)	• Requires conductive substrate • Challenging for large-scale powder

IV. CHARACTERIZATION TECHNIQUES

Such insights are critical for designing efficient rGO-based diodes and underscore the importance of meticulous material characterization for performance optimization. This includes evaluating the electrical, structural, and morphological properties of rGO films and their interfaces within the diode architecture. Further characterization involves techniques like X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy to analyze elemental composition and oxidation states, and Raman spectroscopy to assess defect density and the degree of graphitization, both of which are crucial for understanding the electronic properties governing diode performance. Additionally, advanced microscopy techniques such as atomic force microscopy and transmission electron microscopy provide crucial insights into the surface morphology, layer stacking, and interface quality of rGO films, which directly influence charge transport mechanisms in diode devices [2]. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy can further elucidate the charge transfer kinetics at the rGO-electrode interface, providing valuable information on the resistance and capacitance of the diode. These comprehensive characterization approaches are indispensable for correlating the material's properties with the observed device performance, thereby guiding the rational design of next-generation rGO-based diodes. Beyond these, ex-situ soft X-ray absorption spectroscopy can delineate the charge storage mechanisms, particularly the contributions from oxygen functionalities and pseudocapacitive effects in rGO composites [22].

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V. THE APPLICATION: RGO IN DIODE DEVICE

RGO is an ideal active material for diodes due to its configurable work function and finite band gap. Modern electronics rely on diodes, and rGO-based diodes are ideal for flexible, transparent, and low-cost macro-electronics. This section is grouped by basic diode junction type.

A. Schottky Diodes

A Schottky diode is formed at the junction between a metal and a semiconductor. The rectifying behaviour arises from the Schottky barrier, which limits the flow of charge carriers in one direction. In rGO-based Schottky diodes, the structure typically consists of a metal (such as Au or Al) forming a junction with reduced graphene oxide. The device is fabricated by first spin-coating or drop-casting graphene oxide onto a SiO_2/Si substrate, followed by reducing it to rGO using chemical or thermal techniques, and finally depositing metal electrodes through thermal evaporation to form the contact. Such rGO–metal Schottky diodes exhibit promising performance, with rectification ratios reported as high as 10^3 [23].

B. p-n Junction Diodes

A traditional p–n junction diode is formed by bringing p-type and n-type regions into intimate contact within the same semiconductor, and in the case of rGO, this behaviour can be engineered through controlled doping to create distinct p- and n-type domains. In practical device fabrication, rGO is often combined with n-type semiconductors such as ZnO or MoS_2 to form a heterostructure. The typical process involves depositing an rGO film, growing the n-type semiconductor layer such as ZnO using sputtering and then patterning electrodes to establish both Ohmic and Schottky contacts. This approach enables enhanced rectification behaviour, with significant improvements observed when appropriate doping strategies are applied [24].

C. rGO-Based Light-Emitting Diodes (LEDs)

In rGO-based LEDs, reduced graphene oxide can function either as a transparent electrode or as part of the emissive layer, enabling lightweight and flexible device designs. Fabrication typically involves integrating rGO with quantum dots or organic emitters, followed by optimizing charge injection through the use of suitable interfacial layers to enhance carrier balance. Despite these advantages, such LEDs still face challenges, particularly their relatively low quantum efficiency when compared to conventional LED technologies [25].

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

The development of novel fabrication techniques, such as advanced printing methods and self-assembly, will be essential for scaling up production and achieving cost-effective manufacturing of complex rGO-based architectures. Further research into controlling the precise morphology and defect states of rGO is crucial to optimize device performance and enable their widespread commercialization [26]. The chemical integration of rGO with metal oxides, such as Fe_2O_3-Fe_3O_4, via Fe-O-C bonds can significantly enhance the overall performance of the resulting composite by improving charge transfer and structural integrity [27]. Furthermore, the controlled synthesis of SnO_2–Fe_2O_3/rGO composite nanostructures has demonstrated significantly enhanced specific capacities and cyclabilities for lithium-ion storage, showcasing the material's potential in advanced energy storage solutions [28].

VII. CONCLUSION

This review has established a comprehensive roadmap, illustrating the critical and inseparable link between the synthesis of GO, the reduction technique to form rGO, the resulting material properties, and the ultimate performance in diode applications. We have demonstrated that the electrical conductivity, band gap, and chemical functionality of rGO are not fixed but are powerful levers that can be adjusted through synthetic design.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Full Name	**Nilesh Kailas Misal**
Education	M.Sc., SET
Academic Rank	Assistant Professor
Institution	Late B. S. Arts, Prof. N. G. Science & A. G. Commerce College, Sakharkherda, Dist. Buldhana, Maaharashtra, Pin-443202.

Full Name	**Shrikant Hiwraj Nimkar**
Education	M.Sc., Ph. D.
Academic Rank	Assistant Professor
Institution	Shri Shivaji Arts, Commerce & Science College, Akot, Dist. Akola, Maaharashtra, Pin-444101.

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Full Name	**Radhika Devidas Kalaskar**
Education	M.Sc.
Academic Rank	Independent Researcher
Institution	Shri Shivaji Arts, Commerce & Science College, Akot, Dist. Akola, Maaharashtra, Pin-444101.