Nickel-germanium soft x-ray zone plates

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This article presents a fabrication process for soft x-ray zone plates in which nickel and germanium are combined to achieve high diffraction efficiency. A nickel zone plate is first fabricated on a germanium film and then used as a hardmask for a CHF$_3$-plasma etch into the germanium. Zone plates with 50–60 nm nickel and 110–150 nm of germanium are presented. The measured diffraction efficiencies were 10%–11% at $\lambda=2.88$ nm, which shows that high efficiency is possible even with thin nickel. Thus, the method has a potential for improving the efficiency of high-resolution zone plates for which the high-aspect-ratio structuring of nickel is difficult.

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The progress in nanofabrication of zone-plate optics has enabled the development of soft x-ray microscopy into a suitable technique for nanoscale imaging in material, environmental, and life sciences. The imaging performance is limited by the zone-plate objectives, which are circular gratings with radially increasing line density. Two properties are of special importance: the resolving power, which is determined by the outermost zone width, $d_{in}$, and the diffraction efficiency, which depends on the optical material and its thickness. State-of-the-art zone-plate objectives have zone widths down to about 20 nm (Ref. 10) but as small as 15 nm has been reported. For soft x rays, electroplated nickel zone plates offer the highest efficiency and have therefore been commonly fabricated. The smaller the zone width, the more difficult it becomes to maintain a high diffraction efficiency since the optical material must have sufficient thickness to attenuate or phase shift the x rays. The difficulty of fabricating narrow lines with high-aspect ratio (AR) therefore limits the efficiency of high-resolution zone plates.

In this article we present a fabrication process for soft x-ray zone plates in which two optical materials, nickel and germanium, are used in combination to achieve high diffraction efficiency. In this process a nickel zone plate is first fabricated on a germanium film. A nickel-germanium zone plate is then formed by using the nickel zone plate as a hardmask for the subsequent RIE with O$_2$ into the polymer.

The samples were patterned by e-beam lithography at 25 keV (Raith 150) and developed for 30 s in hexyl acetate. The Ti film was then structured by reactive ion etching (RIE) with BC$_3$ (Plasmalab 80+, Oxford Instruments) and used as a hardmask for the subsequent RIE with O$_2$ into the polymer.

FIG. 1. (Color online) Fabrication process. A Ni zone plate is first fabricated on a Ge film [steps (a)–(f)]. The zone plate itself is then used as a hardmask for a dry etch into the Ge film [step (g)].

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which can be seen in Fig. 3, where nickel gratings etched depth of 15–20 nm. The Ge etch with CHF₃ is anisotropic, nickel films for a duration of 1 h. This resulted in an etch rate of 0.3 nm/min. The latter value was determined by etching into electroplated nickel-germanium zone plates corresponding to about 70%–75% of the theoretical maximum. This is approximately the same fraction as we have previously obtained for thick nickel zone plates (14–150 nm thick). Furthermore, these efficiencies are about twice as high as the theoretical maximum for nickel zone plates with the same nickel thicknesses as the nickel-germanium zone plates had before the germanium etch (cf. Table I).

The amount of nickel lost in the CHF₃-plasma etch was calculated from the measured nickel etch rate of 0.3 nm/min. The etch time used was 15 min for 115 nm of germanium and 25 min for 150 nm of germanium, which gives nickel losses of 5 and 7.5 nm, respectively. The film thickness measurements were carried out with profilometer scans (Tencor). In Fig. 4, SEM images of a zone plate with \( d_{N} = 30 \) nm after the CHF₃ etch. An overview (a) and a magnified view of the outer part (b).

FIG. 2. (Color online) Theoretical diffraction efficiency for gratings composed of nickel and germanium. The different lines correspond to different germanium thicknesses.

FIG. 3. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of 25 nm half-pitch gratings consisting of \(~60\) nm of nickel on top of 150 nm of germanium. The lines in (a) can be seen in the top right corner of the rotated view (b) (52° sample tilt).

TABLE I. Zone-plate parameters and measured efficiencies. \( d_{N} \) is the width of the outermost zone, \( t_{N} \) is the plated nickel thickness before the Ge etch, \( t_{Ge} \) is the thickness of the Ge film, \( \eta \) is the measured groove efficiency, and \( \eta_{th} \) is the maximum theoretical efficiency for a nickel zone plate with a thickness equal to \( t_{N} \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( d_{N} ) (nm)</th>
<th>( t_{N} ) (nm)</th>
<th>( t_{Ge} ) (nm)</th>
<th>( \eta ) (%)</th>
<th>( \eta_{th} ) (%)</th>
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While the germanium thickness can be accurately measured after the vapor deposition, it is difficult to measure the thickness of thin electroplated nickel films since the electroplating process produces local thickness variations and grains with sizes of the order of 10–20 nm (cf. Fig. 3). However, since the mold thickness is accurately known and the profilometer tip scans on top of the grains the tip has a 2 μm radius of curvature, the nickel thickness is not underestimated. This is important as an underestimation of the nickel thickness would result in a corresponding overestimation of the efficiency increase due to the added germanium.

In summary, we have presented a fabrication process for soft x-ray zone plates composed of nickel and germanium and showed that such zone plates can attain high diffraction efficiency even with thin nickel. We therefore conclude that the technique can be useful for the fabrication of high-resolution zone plates with high diffraction efficiency. Alternatively, it can be used to avoid electroplating high ARs in order to improve process yield. We also believe that this fabrication concept is not limited to this particular material combination or to soft x-ray optics. It should be applicable to other combinations of optical materials as well, given that one of them can serve as etch mask.

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