

5436 PCT

CONDUCTIVE INKS WITH METALLO-ORGANIC MODIFIERS

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] Embodiments of the present invention relate to conductive inks including a frit and one or more metallo-organic components and photovoltaic cells having conductive grid lines formed from conductive inks which include a frit and one or more metallo-organic components.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Conductive inks or pastes are used to form metal contacts, such as silver gridlines and bus bars, on the surface of substrates such as silicon. Such substrates can be used in solar cells or photovoltaic cells which convert solar energy to electrical energy when photons from sunlight excite electrons on semiconductors from the valance band to the conduction band. The electrons which flow to the conduction band are collected by the metal contacts. Crystalline silicon solar cells in today's industry are typically coated with an anti-reflection coating to promote light adsorption, which increases cell efficiency. However, the anti-reflection coating also works as an insulator by preventing electrons from transferring from the substrate to the metal contact. Solar cells are typically covered by the anti-reflection coating before a conductive ink is applied. The anti-reflection coatings often comprise silicon nitride, titanium oxide or silicon oxide.

[0003] Conductive inks usually include a glass frit, conductive species and an organic medium. The conductive species, typically metal particles such as silver, provide conductive properties and function as current collectors after formation of the metal contacts. To form the metal contacts, conductive inks are printed onto a substrate. The substrate is then fired at a temperature in the range of about 650° C to about 950° C. A sintering aid is in most instances because the firing temperature is lower than the eutectic point of silver and silicon, and the silver melting point. In addition, solar cells are typically covered by an anti-reflection coating before a conductive ink is applied. The conductive ink should penetrate the anti-reflection coating disposed on the substrate to form metal contacts having ohmic contact with the substrate.

[0004] Conductive inks incorporate glass frits to aid with sintering metal particles to a substrate and to promote adhesion and ohmic contact between the formed metal contact and

5436 PCT

the substrate. Depending on the formulation, glass frits can liquefy upon firing at a temperature between about 300° C and 600° C. When the glass frit liquefies, it tends to flow toward the interface between the metal particles and the anti-reflection coating disposed on the substrate. The melted glass dissolves the anti-reflection coating materials as well as some of the silver and substrate. Once the temperature decreases, the molten silver and the melted or dissolved substrate recrystallize through the liquid phase. As a result, some of the silver crystallites are able to penetrate the anti-reflection layer and form ohmic contact with the substrate. This process is referred to as "fire-through" and facilitates a low contact resistance formation and a stronger bond between silver and the substrate. If a selected frit too aggressive, the substrate can be contaminated thereby degrading the solar cell performance. Selection of appropriate frits or mixtures of frit-precursors helps to avoid such contamination and to achieve good cell efficiency.

[0005] Accordingly, there is a need for a conductive ink which improves the series resistance in a photovoltaic cell, aids in sintering and also has the capability of promoting adhesion and ohmic contact of metal contacts and the substrate through anti-reflection coatings.

SUMMARY

[0006] In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, conductive inks are provided which utilize a glass frit, a conductive species, an organic medium and one or more metallo-organic components that form metal alloys or metal oxides upon firing. As used throughout this application, the terms "paste" and "ink" shall be used interchangeably.

[0007] In one or more embodiments, the frit and one or more metallo-organic components of the conductive ink are combined in a paste adapted to be applied to a substrate, such as a photovoltaic cell, which reduces series resistance of the photovoltaic cell to the same or greater degree as photovoltaic cells with pastes applied thereon which do not include metallo-organic components. When applied to an anti-reflection coating disposed on a substrate, the conductive ink of another embodiment is capable of penetrating the anti-reflection coating to form ohmic contact with the substrate.

[0008] In further embodiments, the one or more metallo-organic components are present in the ink in an amount sufficient to form about 1% by weight of metal oxide upon

5436 PCT

firing. In some embodiments, the conductive ink has one or more metallo-organic components in an amount less than about 40% by weight. In a specific embodiment, the one or more metallo-organic components are present in an amount less than about 15% by weight. In a more specific embodiment, the metallo-organic components are present in an amount less than about 8% by weight.

[0009] Another embodiment of the invention provides for an ink which utilizes a frit that includes one or more of bismuth oxide, silica, boron oxide, tellurium dioxide, and combinations thereof.

[0010] In accordance with one or more embodiments, the conductive ink includes a bismuth metallo-organic component. In a specific embodiment, the bismuth metallo-organic component is present in the conductive ink in an amount of about 4% by weight. In a more specific embodiment, the conductive ink can include bismuth metallo-organic component and a frit containing one or more of bismuth oxide, silica, boron oxide, tellurium dioxide, and combinations thereof.

[0011] In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a photovoltaic cell includes a semiconductor substrate, an anti-reflection coating and conductive gridlines formed from a conductive ink, which includes a frit and one or more metallo-organic components. The conductive ink used in one embodiment of the photovoltaic cells has been fired to form gridlines comprising a metal oxide phase and a conductive species. In one or more embodiments, the conductive ink has been processed to remove the organic medium and sinter the conductive species. According to one embodiment of the present invention, the conductive ink includes a frit comprising one or more of bismuth oxide, silica, boron oxide, tellurium dioxide, and combinations thereof. In another embodiment, one or more metallo-organic components are present in the conductive ink in an amount sufficient to form, upon firing, at least about 1% by weight of metal oxide. In a specific embodiment, one or more metallo-organic components are present in an amount less than about 40% by weight. A more specific embodiment includes one or more metallo-organic components in an amount less than about 15% by weight, while an even more specific embodiment has the one or more metallo-organic components present in an amount less than about 8% by weight.

[0012] In accordance with one or more embodiments, the photovoltaic cells include conductive inks comprising a bismuth metallo-organic component. More specific

5436 PCT

embodiments have conductive inks comprising a bismuth metallo-organic component present in an amount about 4% by weight. Even more specific embodiments of photovoltaic cells utilize a bismuth metallo-organic component and a frit which includes one or more of bismuth oxide, silica, boron oxide, tellurium dioxide, and combinations thereof

- 5 [0013] The foregoing has outlined rather broadly certain features and technical advantages of the present invention. It should be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the specific embodiments disclosed may be readily utilized as a basis for modifying or designing other structures or processes within the scope of the present invention. It should also be realized by those skilled in the art that such equivalent constructions do not depart
10 from the spirit and scope of the invention as set forth in the appended claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

- [0014] Before describing several exemplary embodiments of the invention, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited to the details of construction or process steps set forth in the following description. The invention is capable of other embodiments and of
15 being practiced or being carried out in various ways.

[0015] Aspects of the present invention pertain to conductive inks with one or more metallo-organic components, at least one frit, conductive species and other components, which will now be discussed in greater detail. In addition, aspects of the present invention pertaining to photovoltaic cells will also be discussed in greater detail.

20 Metallo-organics

- [0016] One or more embodiments of the present invention include conductive inks having one or more metallo-organic components. Generally, metallo-organics are compounds containing metal atoms, including metal carboxylate such as neodecanoates, acetates and propionates, metal alkoxide and metal complexes, which are sparingly soluble or insoluble in
25 water. Metallo-organics can also contain any aromatic or aliphatic groups and are sometimes referred to as metal resins when the organic portion consists of groups derived from resins or other natural products. Other suitable metallo-organic components include metal mercaptides. The metallo-organic components used in one or more embodiments can have more than one kind of metal atom.

5436 PCT

[0017] Examples of metallo-organic components used with one or more conductive inks include a combination of boron-metallo-organic, aluminum-metallo-organic, silicon-metallo-organic, bismuth-metallo-organic, zinc-metallo-organic and vanadium-metallo-organic. Sometimes metallo-organics and organo-metallics are defined as two categories. As
5 used throughout this application, the term "metallo-organic" includes both metallo-organics and organo-metallics.

[0018] Without being bound by theory, it is believed that, upon firing, the metallo-organic components will decompose and the organic portions are removed from the conductive ink. Further, metal or metal alloy or metal oxide mixtures can be generated. The
10 amount of solid material generated after firing is referred as "solid content of the metallo-organic components by weight percent." In accordance with one or more embodiments, the metallo-organic component(s) can have at least 0.5% solid content by weight. Another embodiment includes metallo-organic component(s) having at least 1-2% solid content by weight. Without being limited by theory, it is believed that, similar to the use of glass frit in
15 conductive inks, the amount of solid material generated by metallo-organic component(s) influences the ability of the conductive ink to form an electrical conductor on or form ohmic contact with the substrate. This ability consequently, drives the performance of the device incorporating conductive ink, such as a semiconductor, a photovoltaic cell or an automotive glass.

[0019] In one or more embodiments of the invention, the metallo-organic components include bismuth metallo-organic components, and/or silver metallo-organic components. A specific embodiment of the invention can include one or more of bismuth metallo-organic components, silver metallo-organic components or boron metallo-organic components. Another embodiment of the invention includes one or combinations of bismuth metallo-
25 organic components, silver metallo-organic components, boron metallo-organic components, aluminum metallo-organic components, zinc metallo-organic components and/or vanadium metallo-organic components.

[0020] According to one embodiment, to achieve desired properties, single element or metal oxides or colloidal metal suspensions can be added to the metallo-organic components
30 as modifiers to enhance a certain element content or bring in new properties. For example,

5436 PCT

phosphorous, P_2O_5 or other type of phosphorous-contained compound can be added to make self-doping pastes for use in solar cell applications.

[0021] Additional factors for formulating metallo-organic components may be considered to adjust the resulting properties. One consideration includes controlling the aggressiveness of the conductive ink on the anti-reflection coating and to avoid contamination of the substrate. Another consideration includes selecting a thermal decomposition temperature in the range from about 200° C to about 500° C or in another range depending on the firing profile, to provide enough time and heat for the solid mixture decomposed from the metallo-organic component(s) to react with the conductive species and anti-reflection coating.

The use of metal carboxylates or low temperature chemical vapor deposition ("CVD") precursors can be considered for adjusting the decomposition temperature. A third consideration includes selecting one or more metallo-organic components which have a consistency suitable for printing or which can also be used as rheology modifiers.

Conductive Species

[0022] In one or more embodiments, the conductive ink utilizes a conductive species such as silver in powdered or particulate form. Other non-limiting examples of suitable conductive species include conductive metals such as gold, copper and platinum in powdered or particulate form.

[0023] The silver species used in one or more embodiments can be in the form of one or more fine powders of silver metal or silver alloys. In other embodiments, silver can be added as silver salts such as silver nitrate ($AgNO_3$). According to one or more embodiments, the conductive species should be capable of being sintered at a temperature greater than about 500°C.

[0024] One or more embodiments omit the use of conductive species and, instead, utilize metallo-organic components which form one or more conductive metal elements upon firing. Examples of conductive metal elements include copper, silver, gold, platinum and/or other precious metals and combinations thereof. One or more embodiments utilize both conductive species and metallo-organic components which form conductive metal elements upon firing.

5436 PCT

Glass Frits

[0025] Glass frit powders used in one or more embodiments of the present invention contain one or more of bismuth oxide, silica, boron oxide, tellurium dioxide, and combinations thereof.

- 5 [0026] One specific embodiment includes a glass frit which incorporates tellurium dioxide and has no intentionally added lead. In such embodiments, the term "no intentionally added lead" means a glass frit having lead in an amount less than about 1,000 ppm. In a specific embodiment, the glass frit includes tellurium dioxide in an amount between about 0.01% by weight and 10% by weight. A more specific embodiment of a glass frit used in
10 accordance with the present invention includes tellurium dioxide, ZnO, Al₂O₃ and combinations thereof. An even more specific embodiment of a tellurium dioxide-containing glass frit can also include other components such as Ag₂O, Sb₂O₃, GeO₂, In₂O₃, P₂O₅, V₂O₅, Nb₂O₅, and Ta₂O₅. Additional embodiments of the present invention utilize alkaline metal oxides and/or alkaline earth metal oxides such as Na₂O, Li₂O, and/or K₂O and BaO, CaO,
15 MgO and/or SrO, respectively.

- [0027] In one embodiment, the glass frit utilized in the conductive ink according to the present invention comprises more than about 20% and less than about 60% by weight of Bi₂O₃, about 15% to about 30% by weight of SiO₂, and about 2% to about 9% by weight of B₂O₃, wherein the glass frit is substantially free of Na₂O. According to one or more
20 embodiments, substantially free of Na₂O shall mean that Na₂O is present in the frit in an amount in the range of about 0% to 0.2% by weight.

- [0028] Conductive inks according to one or more embodiments of the present invention also incorporate bismuth tellurate and/or bismuth silicate powders. It has been found that the addition of bismuth tellurate and/or bismuth silicate powders can control
25 crystallization of the glass frit by shifting the onset of crystallization to lower temperatures.

- [0029] While the present invention should not be bound by theory, it is believed that bismuth tellurate and/or bismuth silicate powders provide nucleation sites for crystal growth. In a photovoltaic application, the glass frit should penetrate through or dissolve the anti-reflective layer to enable the silver to form ohmic contact, however, controlling the
30 aggressiveness of glass frit is desired to prevent it from penetrating through the junction of the semiconductor which would shunt the device. Other embodiments utilize other known phases

5436 PCT

which produce the same or similar effect as bismuth tellurate and/or bismuth silicate, such as titania, zirconia, phosphorous compound and others.

Other Components

[0030] The conductive ink according to one or more embodiments may also include an organic vehicle. The organic vehicle disperses the particulate components and facilitates transfer of the ink composition onto a surface. In at least one embodiment, the organic vehicle includes any suitably inert solvent, resins and commonly used surfactants. Specifically, the organic vehicle dissolves the resins and disperses the conductive species and metallo-organic components to form a conductive ink having suitable rheology. Various organic vehicles with or without thickening agents, stabilizing agents and/or other common additives are suitable for use in the preparation of the embodiments of the present invention. Examples of solvents include alcohols (including glycols) as well as esters of such alcohols, terpenes such as pine oil, terpineol and the like. More specific solvents include dibutyl phthalate, diethylene glycol monbutyl ether, terpineol, isopropanol, tridecanol and 2,2,4-trimethyl-1,3-pentanediol monoisobutyrate. Some embodiments utilize solvents that also contain volatile liquids to promote faster drying after application to a substrate.

[0031] Examples of suitable resins include ethyl cellulose, methyl cellulose, nitrocellulose, carboxymethyl cellulose and other cellulose derivatives. Other examples include resins such as acrylic acid esters, methacrylic acid esters, polyvinyl alcohols, polyketones and polyvinyl butyrals.

[0032] In one specific embodiment, solutions of resins such as polymethacrylates of lower alcohols are used, while in a more specific embodiment, the organic vehicle includes ethyl cellulose in solvents such as pine oil and monobutyl ether of diethylene glycol.

[0033] According to one or more embodiments, the ratio of organic vehicle to solids in the conductive ink can vary considerably and is determined by the final desired formulation rheology which, in turn, is determined by the printing requirements of the system. In one or more embodiments, the conductive ink can contain about 50 to about 95% by weight solids and about 5% to about 50% by weight organic vehicle.

[0034] One or more embodiments of the conductive inks may additionally comprise further additives known in the art, such as colorants and staining agents, rheology modifiers, adhesion enhancers, sintering inhibitors, green-strength modifiers, surfactants and the like.

5436 PCT

[0035] The conductive ink according to one or more embodiments may be prepared by suitable equipment, such as a triple-roll mill. In at least one embodiment, the one or more metallo-organic components, glass frit, conductive species and organic vehicles are pre-mixed and dispersed on the mill.

5 Photovoltaic cells

[0036] Another aspect of the present invention provides for photovoltaic cells comprising a semiconductor substrate, an anti-reflection coating on the substrate and conductive gridlines. According to one or more embodiments, the conductive gridlines are formed from a conductive ink comprising a glass frit, a conductive species, an organic
10 medium and one or more metallo-organic components. One or more of the embodiments of conductive inks disclosed herein can be used to form the conductive gridlines. According to one or more embodiments, one or more metallo-organic components are desired so that the conductive ink can penetrate or dissolve the anti-reflection coating on the substrate and establish ohmic contact.

15 [0037] In one or more embodiments, the semiconductor substrate can be silicon. Other suitable substrates known in the art can be utilized such as doped semiconductor substrates. According to one or more embodiments, the anti-reflection coatings can comprise silicon dioxide, titanium oxide, silicon nitride or other coatings known in the art.

[0038] The semiconductor substrate may comprise monocrystalline or multicrystalline
20 silicon. The anti-reflection coatings can be applied to the substrate using chemical vapor deposition techniques. In some embodiments, plasma enhanced chemical vapor deposition techniques are used to apply an anti-reflection coating to the substrate. Semiconductor substrates according to one or more embodiments may also be etched or textured to reduce reflection of sunlight and enhance the level of absorption. According to one or more
25 embodiments, the conductive ink is thereafter applied to the surface of the substrate or anti-reflection coating by screen printing or other technique. The substrate is heated or fired to a temperature of about 650° to 950° C to form grid lines. In one embodiment, as otherwise discussed in this application, the firing process allows the glass frit to melt and penetrate the anti-reflection coating. In one or more embodiments, the conductive species forms
30 crystallites at the interface of conductors and the substrate, which enhances electrical or ohmic contact between the conductors and the semiconductor substrate.

5436 PCT

[0039] Without intending to limit the invention in any manner, embodiments of the present invention will be more fully described by the following examples.

EXAMPLES

[0040] The fill factor, cell efficiency and series resistance of six photovoltaic cells having six conductive inks (Inks A-C and Comparative Inks A-C) printed on each cell were tested to measure the performance of the device and the inks disposed thereon. Inks A-C included a silver conductive species and three different glass frits each. The glass frits included bismuth oxide, silica, boron oxide and zinc oxide. Comparative Inks A-C included a silver conductive species and a bismuth metallo-organic component. Conductive Ink A also includes the glass frit tested in Ink A, while Conductive Inks B and C include the glass frits tested in Inks B and C, respectively. The performance of each photovoltaic cell was measured and reproduced in Table 1. The resulting values of the photovoltaic cells with Comparative Inks A, B and C were normalized with respect to corresponding Inks A, B and C, respectively

Table 1: Solar cell testing results of conductive inks with and without metallo-organic components

	Ink	Fill Factor	Cell Efficiency	Series Resistance (ohm/cm ²)
Frit 1	Ink A	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Comparative Ink A	1.45	1.47	0.20
Frit 2	Ink B	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Comparative Ink B	1.14	1.14	0.39
Frit 3	Ink C	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Comparative Ink C	1.08	1.10	0.60

[0041] The “fill factor” and “efficiency” are measures of the performance of a semiconductor. The term “fill factor” is defined as the ratio of the maximum power ($V_{mp} \times J_{mp}$) divided by the product of short-circuit current density (J_{sc}) and open-circuit voltage (V_{oc}) in current - voltage (I-V) characterization of solar cells. The open circuit voltage (V_{oc}) is the

5436 PCT

maximum voltage obtainable under open-circuit conditions. The short circuit current density (J_{sc}) is the maximum current density without the load under short-circuit conditions. The fill factor (FF), is thus defined as $(V_{mp}J_{mp})/(V_{oc}J_{sc})$, where J_{mp} and V_{mp} represent the current density and voltage at the maximum power point.

5 [0042] The term "efficiency" is the percentage of power converted (from absorbed light converted to electrical energy) and collected when a solar cell is connected to an electrical circuit. Efficiency (η) is calculated using the ratio peak power (P_m) divided by the product of total incident irradiance (E , measured in Wm^{-2}) and device area (A , measured in m^2) under "standard" test conditions where $\eta = P_m / (E \times A)$.

10 [0043] As shown in Table 1, Comparative Inks A, B and C exhibited a greater efficiency than Inks A, B and C, respectively. Accordingly, based on this data, it is believed that the addition of one or more metallo-organic components to a conductive ink will improve performance of a photovoltaic cell.

[0044] Reference throughout this specification to "one embodiment," "certain
15 embodiments," "one or more embodiments" or "an embodiment" means that a particular feature, structure, material, or characteristic described in connection with the embodiment is included in at least one embodiment of the invention. Thus, the appearances of the phrases such as "in one or more embodiments," "in certain embodiments," "in one embodiment" or "in an embodiment" in various places throughout this specification are not necessarily
20 referring to the same embodiment of the invention. Furthermore, the particular features, structures, materials, or characteristics may be combined in any suitable manner in one or more embodiments.

[0045] Although the invention herein has been described with reference to particular
25 embodiments, it is to be understood that these embodiments are merely illustrative of the principles and applications of the present invention. It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various modifications and variations can be made to the method and apparatus of the present invention without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Thus, it is intended that the present invention include modifications and variations that are within the scope of the appended claims and their equivalents.

5436 PCT

What is claimed is:

1. A conductive ink comprising a glass frit; a conductive species; an organic medium;
and one or more metallo-organic components that form metal oxides upon firing,
5 wherein the glass frit and metallo-organic components are combined in a paste
adapted to be applied to a substrate, the ink adapted to reduce series resistance to the
same or greater degree as inks that do not include metallo-organic components.
2. The ink of claim 1, wherein the one or more metallo-organic components are present
10 in an amount sufficient to form metal oxide in an amount of at least about 1% by
weight upon firing.
3. The ink of claim 1, wherein the one or more metallo-organic components are present
in an amount less than about 40% by weight.
- 15 4. The ink of claim 3, wherein the one or more metallo-organic components are present
in an amount less than about 15% by weight.
5. The ink of claim 4, wherein the one or more metallo-organic components are present
20 in an amount less than about 8% by weight.
6. The ink of claim 1, wherein the one or more metallo-organic components further
comprise bismuth metallo-organic.
- 25 7. The ink of claim 6, wherein the bismuth metallo-organic is present in an amount about
4% by weight.
8. The ink of claims 1 or 6, wherein the glass frit comprises one or more of bismuth
oxide, silica, boron oxide tellurium dioxide, and combinations thereof.

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5436 PCT

9. The ink of claim 1, wherein upon application of the ink to an anti-reflection coating disposed on the substrate, the conductive ink is capable of penetrating the anti-reflection coating to form ohmic contact with the substrate.
- 5 10. A photovoltaic cell comprising a semiconductor substrate; an anti-reflection coating; and conductive grid lines formed from a conductive ink according to any of claims 1-9 wherein the ink has been processed to remove the organic medium and sinter the conductive species.