WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A mask blank having a structure in which a pattern-forming thin film and a hard mask film are formed as layers on a substrate in this order;

wherein the hard mask film is made of a material containing silicon, oxygen, and nitrogen;

wherein the hard mask film has a nitrogen content of at least 2 atomic% and at most 18 atomic%;

wherein the hard mask film has an oxygen content of at least 50 atomic%; and

wherein an Si2p narrow spectrum, obtained by analyzing the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, has a maximum peak at a binding energy of at least 103 eV.

2. The mask blank according to claim 1, wherein the Si2p narrow spectrum, obtained by analyzing the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, does not have a peak at a binding energy in a range of at least 97 eV and at most 100 eV.

3. The mask blank according to claim 1 or 2, wherein a difference is at most 0.2 eV between a binding energy at which the maximum peak is present in the Si2p narrow spectrum obtained by analyzing a surface of the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy and a binding energy at which the maximum peak is present in the Si2p narrow spectrum obtained by analyzing an inside of the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy.

4. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein a difference is at most 0.2 eV between a binding energy at which a maximum peak is present in an N1s narrow spectrum obtained by analyzing a surface of the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy and a binding energy at which a maximum peak is present in an N1s narrow spectrum obtained by analyzing an inside of the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy.

5. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein a difference is at most 0.2 eV between a binding energy at which a maximum peak is present in an O1s narrow spectrum obtained by analyzing a surface of the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy and a binding energy at which a maximum peak is present in an O1s narrow spectrum obtained by analyzing an inside of the hard mask film by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy.

6. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein the hard mask film has an oxygen content of at least ~~50~~ 55 atomic%.

7. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to 6, wherein the hard mask film is formed of ~~a material containing silicon, oxygen, and nitrogen or~~ a material containing silicon, oxygen, nitrogen, and at least one element selected from metalloid elements and non-metal elements.

8. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to 6, wherein the hard mask film is formed of a material consisting of silicon, oxygen and nitrogen.

~~8~~9. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to ~~7~~8, wherein the pattern-forming thin film is made of a material containing at least one element selected from chromium, tantalum, and nickel.

~~9~~10. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to ~~8~~9, wherein the pattern-forming thin film is a light-shielding film.

~~10~~11. The mask blank according to claim ~~9~~10, wherein a phase shift film is formed between the substrate and the light-shielding film.

~~11~~12. The mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to ~~7~~8, wherein a multilayer reflective film is formed between the substrate and the pattern-forming thin film and the pattern-forming thin film is an absorber film or a phase shift film.

~~12~~13. A method for manufacturing a transfer mask by using the mask blank according to any one of claims 1 to ~~11~~12, comprising the steps of:

forming a transfer pattern on the hard mask film by dry etching using a fluorine-based gas and using, as a mask, a resist film formed on the hard mask film and having the transfer pattern; and

forming the transfer pattern on the pattern-forming thin film by dry etching using a chlorine-containing gas and using, as a mask, the hard mask film with the transfer pattern formed thereon.

~~13~~14. The method according to claim ~~12~~13, wherein the dry etching using the chlorine-containing gas is dry etching which is carried out by using an oxygen-containing chlorine-based gas with an increased ratio of a chlorine-based gas and under a condition where a high bias voltage is applied.

~~14~~15. The method according to claim ~~12~~13, wherein the dry etching using the chlorine-containing gas is dry etching which is carried out by using an oxygen-free chlorine-based gas and under a condition where a high bias voltage is applied.

~~15~~16. A method for manufacturing a semiconductor device, comprising a step of using the transfer mask manufactured by the method according to any one of claims ~~12~~ 13 to ~~14~~ 15 and transferring by exposure the transfer pattern on a resist film on a substrate to be provided with a semiconductor device.