

Comprehensive Guide to ASTM E155: Standard Reference Radiographs for Aluminum and Magnesium Castings

Published: May 27, 2026 | Index ID: #765

In the high-stakes world of aerospace, automotive, and heavy industrial manufacturing, the structural integrity of cast components is non-negotiable. Among the most critical tools for ensuring this integrity is **ASTM E155**, the definitive standard for reference radiographs used in the inspection of aluminum and magnesium castings. This guide provides a deep-seated technical analysis of the standard, its application in Non-Destructive Testing (NDT), and its role in modern quality assurance frameworks.

Understanding the Significance of ASTM E155 in NDT

ASTM E155, titled **Standard Reference Radiographs for Inspection of Aluminum and Magnesium Castings**, serves as the foundational benchmark for evaluating the internal soundness of lightweight alloy castings. Unlike general radiographic procedures that define *how* to take an X-ray, ASTM E155 provides the *interpretive* baseline. It allows inspectors to compare production radiographs against a standardized set of images to determine the type and severity of discontinuities.

Aluminum and magnesium are favored in engineering for their high strength-to-weight ratios. However, the casting process for these materials is susceptible to various defects—ranging from gas entrapment to complex shrinkage patterns—that can compromise the mechanical properties of the part. ASTM E155 categorizes these defects, providing a visual and quantitative grading system that ensures consistency across different foundries, laboratories, and regulatory bodies.

The Theoretical Framework of Radiographic Inspection

To appreciate ASTM E155, one must understand the physics of radiographic testing (RT). RT relies on the differential absorption of ionizing radiation (X-rays or Gamma rays) as it passes through a material. The degree of absorption is governed by the **Beer-Lambert Law**, which can be mathematically expressed as:

$$I = I_0 e^{-\mu x}$$

Where:

- I is the intensity of radiation after passing through the material.
- I_0 is the initial intensity of the radiation source.
- μ — Attenuation coefficient of the material (dependent on density and atomic number).
- x is the thickness of the material.

In a casting, a discontinuity such as a gas hole represents a localized reduction in thickness (x) or density. Consequently, more radiation passes through that area, creating a darker spot on the radiographic film or digital detector. ASTM E155 provides the standardized examples of these "darker spots" to ensure that what one inspector calls "Severity Level 2" is the same across the global supply chain.

Categorization of Discontinuities in ASTM E155

The standard divides discontinuities into several distinct categories based on their morphology and origin during

the solidification process. Understanding these categories is essential for root cause analysis in manufacturing.

1. Gas Holes and Porosity

Gas holes appear as distinct, round, or elongated dark spots with well-defined edges. They are typically caused by trapped air or gases evolved during the pouring process. **Gas porosity**, conversely, appears as a cluster of fine, minute holes, often resulting from hydrogen gas being rejected from the liquid metal during cooling.

2. Shrinkage Discontinuities

Shrinkage occurs when there is insufficient molten metal to feed the cavity as it solidifies. ASTM E155 identifies several sub-types:

- **Sponge Shrinkage:** A localized area of dendritic (branch-like) voids that appears as a cloudy, dark area on the radiograph.
- **Feathery/Filamentary Shrinkage:** More elongated and interconnected voids that often indicate a more severe thermal gradient issue.
- **Dendritic Shrinkage:** A pattern that follows the crystal structure of the metal, appearing as a network of fine lines.

3. Inclusions (Foreign Material)

Inclusions are non-metallic or foreign metallic particles trapped in the casting.

Less Dense Inclusions: Often sand or dross, appearing darker than the surrounding metal.

More Dense Inclusions: High-density particles (like tungsten in aluminum) that appear lighter (whiter) than the surrounding metal because they absorb more radiation.

Technical Specifications: Volume I and Volume II

ASTM E155 is typically organized into two volumes to address the specific needs of different alloy families. These volumes consist of actual radiographic films (in traditional sets) or digital files that represent specific thickness ranges.

Feature	Volume I (Aluminum)	Volume II (Magnesium)
Primary Material	Aluminum Alloys	Magnesium Alloys
Thickness Coverage	Typically up to 2 inches (50 mm)	Typically up to 2 inches (50 mm)
Typical Discontinuities	Gas holes, Porosity, Shrinkage, Inclusions	Microshrinkage, Reactivity defects, Inclusions
Reference Sizes	Various plate thicknesses (e.g., 1/4", 3/4")	Standardized plate casting sections

The Grading Scale: Severity Levels 1 through 8

The core of the ASTM E155 system is the **Severity Level**. For each type of discontinuity, the standard provides eight levels of increasing severity. Level 1 represents a nearly perfect casting with minimal flaws, while Level 8 represents a significant presence of the discontinuity.

Engineering specifications for a part will usually state an "Acceptance Criteria" based on these levels. For example, a safety-critical aerospace component might require "Gas Holes: Severity Level 2 or better," whereas a non-structural bracket might allow up to "Severity Level 5."

Technical Comparison of Severity Levels

Severity Grade	Structural Impact	Typical Application
Levels 1-2	Negligible impact on fatigue life	Aerospace engine components, primary structures
Levels 3-4	Minor reduction in mechanical properties	Automotive suspension, industrial housings
Levels 5-6	Moderate risk of stress concentration	General machinery parts, decorative castings
Levels 7-8	Significant risk of failure under load	Rarely accepted in engineering applications

Procedural Execution: How to Use ASTM E155

Using the reference radiographs effectively requires a disciplined technical workflow. It is not merely a matter of "looking at pictures."

Step 1: Preparation of Production Radiographs

The production radiograph must be produced using techniques (voltage, current, film type/digital sensor, and source-to-film distance) that ensure the image quality is sufficient for comparison. This is often verified using an **Image Quality Indicator (IQI)** or penetrameter.

Step 2: Determining Relevant Section Thickness

The inspector must identify the thickness of the casting section being evaluated. ASTM E155 provides different reference standards for different thickness ranges. Using a 1/4-inch reference to evaluate a 1-inch thick section is technically invalid and can lead to incorrect grading.

Step 3: Side-by-Side Comparison

The inspector places the production radiograph on a high-intensity film viewer (or a calibrated monitor for digital RT) alongside the ASTM E155 reference. The evaluation must consider:

- **Type Match:** Ensure the discontinuity in the part matches the type in the reference (e.g., don't grade shrinkage using a gas hole reference).
- **Density Match:** The radiographic density of the reference and the production film must be comparable within specified tolerances.

Step 4: Final Grading and Reporting

The inspector assigns the highest severity level observed within any specified area (often a 2x2 inch square). The final report must cite the ASTM E155 version used (e.g., E155-20), the volume, the category of defect, and the assigned level.

Modern Evolution: From Film to Digital (ASTM E2422)

While the search data highlights various years of E155 (2000, 2014, 2015, 2020), it is important to note the industry's shift toward **Digital Radiography (DR)** and **Computed Radiography (CR)**. ASTM E155 is traditionally a film-based standard. To accommodate the digital era, ASTM developed **ASTM E2422**, which provides digital reference radiographs that correspond to the E155 categories.

Digital reference radiographs offer several advantages:

- **No Degradation:** Unlike physical film, which can fade or scratch over time, digital files remain identical.
- **Image Manipulation:** Inspectors can use software to zoom and adjust brightness/contrast, provided they follow strict protocols to prevent "hiding" defects.
- **Automated Analysis:** Emerging AI and Machine Learning tools use E155/E2422 data sets to train algorithms for automated defect recognition (ADR).

Field Guide: Troubleshooting Common Inspection Challenges

Even with a robust standard like ASTM E155, field inspections can encounter obstacles. Here are technical solutions for common challenges:

Issue: Overlapping Discontinuities

Scenario: A casting shows both gas porosity and shrinkage in the same area. **Solution:** In most quality frameworks, each type must be graded separately. However, the cumulative effect may be governed by the "Total Discontinuity" clause in the specific contract or engineering drawing.

Issue: Variations in Material Density

Scenario: An aluminum alloy contains high levels of silicon or other alloying elements that change its attenuation.

Solution: The inspector must use a technique that achieves the required sensitivity on the production part. If the alloy is significantly different from the standard aluminum reference, additional calibration or a custom "Master Yield" radiograph might be required.

Issue: Determining "Indication Area"

Scenario: Defects are scattered throughout a large casting. **Solution:** ASTM E155 is typically applied to a specific "evaluation area" (usually the most severe 52x52mm area). Inspectors must be trained to identify the worst-case zone rather than averaging the defect density across the entire part.

Case Study: Aerospace Structural Bracket Inspection

To illustrate the practical application, consider a safety-critical engine mounting bracket cast from **A356 aluminum alloy**. The engineering requirement specifies "ASTM E155, Gas Holes Level 1, Shrinkage Level 2."

During inspection, the radiograph reveals a cluster of gas holes in the mounting flange. By comparing this to the Volume I, 3/4-inch plate reference for Gas Holes, the inspector determines the cluster is slightly more dense than the Level 1 image but less than Level 2. Under most strict aerospace standards (like **NADCAP**), this would be graded as Level 2. Since the requirement was Level 1, the part is rejected. This rigorous application prevents a potential fatigue failure that could lead to engine detachment.

Integrating ASTM E155 into Quality Management Systems (QMS)

For organizations looking to implement or upgrade their radiographic inspection capabilities, ASTM E155 should be part of a broader QMS, such as **ISO 9001** or **AS9100**. This involves:

1. **Personnel Certification:** Ensuring inspectors are certified to Level II or III in Radiographic Testing according to SNT-TC-1A or NAS410.
2. **Equipment Calibration:** Regular densitometer calibration and film processor monitoring.
3. **Document Control:** Ensuring the most current version of the ASTM E155 standard is available (currently the 2020 revision).

The Broader Implications for Engineering and Safety

The existence of ASTM E155 facilitates global trade in the manufacturing sector. A designer in Germany can specify a casting quality level, a foundry in Vietnam can produce the part to that standard, and an end-user in the United States can verify the quality with absolute confidence. This interoperability is what allows the complex global supply chains of companies like Boeing, Airbus, and Tesla to function safely.

As we move toward more complex casting geometries and the integration of additive manufacturing (where casting-like defects still occur), the principles established by ASTM E155 remain the gold standard. While the medium may change from physical film to digital voxels and 3D CT scans, the fundamental need to categorize and grade discontinuities remains a cornerstone of mechanical engineering and public safety.

Ultimately, ASTM E155 is more than a collection of X-ray images; it is a vital language of quality that translates abstract engineering requirements into tangible, safe, and reliable metal components. By adhering to its rigorous technical guidelines, manufacturers ensure that the hidden flaws within their products never become visible failures in the field.

Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

- [Comprehensive Guide to ASTM A388: Standard Practice for Ultrasonic Examination of Heavy Steel Forgings](#)

URL: <http://alghafgolden.com/astm-a388-ultrasonic-examination-steel-forgings-guide.pdf>

- [The Comprehensive Guide to Liquid Penetrant Testing \(PT\): Engineering Principles, Level II Methodologies, and Technical Standards](#)

URL: <http://alghafgolden.com/comprehensive-guide-liquid-penetrant-testing-asnt-level-ii.pdf>

Tags: #ASTM E155 #Radiographic Inspection #Aluminum Casting #Magnesium Casting #Quality Control

