

# AN14822

## How to Use SmartDMA to Implement SPI Interface on MCXA MCU

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Application note

### Document information

Information	Content
Keywords	AN14822, SmartDMA, MCXA346, MCXA34, SPI
Abstract	This application note describes how to use SmartDMA to implement the SPI on MCXA series MCUs.



## 1 Introduction

This application note describes how to use SmartDMA to implement the serial peripheral interface (SPI) on MCXA series MCUs. This document introduces the SPI interface, details the SmartDMA implementation, and demonstrates its use with the ICM42688 6-axis IMU sensor. The MCXA MCU features a coprocessor called SmartDMA, which enables a flexible SPI interface with precise timing control and low CPU overhead.

## 2 SPI interface

SPI is a synchronous serial communication interface used for short-distance communication, primarily in embedded systems.

SPI devices communicate in full-duplex mode using a controller-target architecture with a single controller. The controller device originates the frame for both reading and writing. It supports multiple target devices, each selected through individual target select (SS) lines.

### 2.1 SPI signal lines

SPI enables high-speed, full-duplex communication between a controller and target devices using the four key signal lines as shown in [Table 1](#):

Table 1. SPI signals

Signal	Direction	Description
MISO	Target > Controller	Data line from target to controller
MOSI	Controller > Target	Data line from controller to target
SCLK	Controller > Target	Clock signal generated by the controller
SS/CS	Controller > Target	Target selection signal (active low)

### 2.2 SPI modes

SPI defines four distinct communication modes, as shown in [Table 2](#), by combining the following two configurable parameters:

- CPOL
- CPHA

Table 2. SPI modes

Mode	CPOL	CPHA	Clock Idle State	Data Sampling Edge
0	0	0	Low	Rising edge
1	0	1	Low	Falling edge
2	1	0	High	Falling edge
3	1	1	High	Rising edge

## 3 SmartDMA SPI implementation

SmartDMA is a coprocessor unit within the MCX MCU that can execute a reduced instruction set. It provides precise timing control and can access the GPIO in a single cycle, making it ideal for implementing timing-critical protocols like SPI.

Following are the performance aspects of SmartDMA for SPI on MCXA MCUs:

- Uses the system clock of the MCU as its clock source.
- Supports configurable SPI clock frequencies up to 25 MHz under a 150 MHz system clock.
- Controls general-purpose input/outputs (GPIOs) at the hardware level, enabling submicrosecond response times.
- Supports various SPI modes, including all clock polarity (CPOL) or clock phase (CPHA) combinations.
- Transfers data efficiently with minimal CPU intervention.

Following are the key characteristics of the SmartDMA SPI implementation:

- Timing synchronization: Both functions maintain identical clock timing patterns to ensure proper controller-target synchronization.
- Data direction control: The transmit function manages MOSI output signals, while the receive function monitors MISO input signals.
- MSB-first protocol: Each byte is transmitted and received starting with the most significant bit, following the standard SPI convention.
- Chip select framing: The CS signal frames each complete byte transaction.
- Timing compliance: Strategic delay insertions ensure compliance with SPI timing specifications for setup and hold requirements.

### 3.1 SmartDMA SPI timing implementation

The SmartDMA SPI timing implementation follows a methodology similar to MCU-based Arm core approaches, while applying SmartDMA capabilities to enhance performance. The SPI communication process using SmartDMA handles both transmitting and receiving data. This process follows a structured sequence of steps as detailed below to ensure precise timing and efficient data handling.

1. The communication begins by asserting the chip select with CS = 0 for sending, or by initializing the variables `received_data = 0` and CS = 0 for receiving.
2. The loop is prepared by setting `bit_count = 7` so that transmission and reception start from the most significant bit (MSB first).
3. The data lines are set up, where MOSI is loaded with the value `(data >> bit_count)` and 1 for sending, while in receiving MOSI is placed in its idle state with MOSI = 1.
4. A setup time is allowed before the clock transition by applying a short delay using `delay_us()`.
5. The rising edge of the clock is triggered by raising SCLK to 1, which causes the target to sample data in sending, or output data in receiving.
6. The clock is then maintained high for the required duration, again using `delay_us()`.
7. During this period, data sampling occurs: in sending, MISO can optionally be read for full duplex operation, and in receiving, MISO is read and stored in the variable `received_data |= (MISO << bit_count)`.
8. The clock is lowered to complete the cycle by setting SCLK back to 0.
9. The bit counter is decremented with `bit_count--` to move to the next bit.
10. If `bit_count >= 0`, the procedure repeats from [step 3](#) to continue processing the remaining bits.
11. When all bits have been processed, communication is finished by deasserting the chip select with CS = 1, which releases the chip and ends the operation.

### 3.2 Timing pseudocode

The following pseudocodes illustrate the SPI communication protocol with precise timing sequences for both transmit and receive operations.

- Transmit timing pseudocode
- Receive timing pseudocode

These pseudocodes provide a comprehensive foundation for implementing reliable SPI communication with precise timing control in embedded systems.

### 3.2.1 Transmit timing pseudocode

The following pseudocode illustrates the bit-by-bit transmission sequence for sending data over the SPI interface:

```
Function: SmartDMA_SPI_SendByte(data)
Input: data - 8-bit data to transmit
Output: void (or optionally return received data for full-duplex operation)
BEGIN
1. CS = 0 // Assert chip select to initiate communication
2. FOR bit_count = 7 DOWN TO 0 DO // Iterate through 8 bits, MSB transmitted first
3. IF (data & (1 << bit_count)) THEN
MOSI = 1 // Set MOSI high for logical '1'
ELSE
MOSI = 0 // Set MOSI low for logical '0'
END IF
4. delay_us() // Setup time delay to meet timing requirements
5. SCLK = 1 // Generate clock rising edge, slave samples data
6. delay_us() // Clock high hold time for stable sampling
7. SCLK = 0 // Generate clock falling edge
8. delay_us() // Clock low hold time (optional recovery period)
END FOR
9. CS = 1 // Deassert chip select to terminate communication
END
```

### 3.2.2 Receive timing pseudocode

The following pseudocode demonstrates the bit-by-bit reception sequence for reading data from the SPI interface:

```
Function: SmartDMA_SPI_ReceiveByte()
Input: void
Output: received_data - 8-bit received data
BEGIN
1. received_data = 0 // Initialize receive data buffer
2. CS = 0 // Assert chip select to initiate communication
3. MOSI = 1 // Set MOSI to idle high state (optional)
4. FOR bit_count = 7 DOWN TO 0 DO // Iterate through 8 bits, MSB received first
5. delay_us() // Setup time delay before clock transition
6. SCLK = 1 // Generate clock rising edge, slave outputs data
7. delay_us() // Clock high hold time for stable data output
8. IF (MISO == 1) THEN
received_data |= (1 << bit_count) // Capture and store received bit
END IF
9. SCLK = 0 // Generate clock falling edge
10. delay_us() // Clock low hold time (optional recovery period)
END FOR
11. CS = 1 // Deassert chip select to terminate communication
12. RETURN received_data // Return the complete received byte
END
```

### 3.3 SmartDMA SPI performance advantages

This section describes the performance of SmartDMA-based SPI communication, in comparison to traditional GPIO-based SPI methods. While maintaining the same logical sequence as traditional GPIO-based SPI, SmartDMA provides:

- Hardware-accelerated timing: Delivers timing control without requiring CPU intervention.
- DMA buffer management: Automatically handles multibyte transfers.
- Reduced CPU overhead: Offloads SPI operation to background processing capabilities.
- Enhanced throughput: Achieves higher data transfer rates compared to bit-banging methods.

Practical testing demonstrates that SmartDMA delivers 25 MHz SPI clock rates at 180 MHz core frequency, with optimization potential for higher speeds.

## 4 Demo code

This demo code implements a SmartDMA-driven SPI interface for the ICM42688 sensor. It features firmware-based initialization, parameter configuration, and half-duplex read/write operations. It also enables complete sensor control functions for accelerometer and gyroscope data acquisition with hardware-accelerated communication. This demo code also demonstrates the practical application of the transmit and receive pseudocode from [Section 3.2](#). It also provides a working example of how SmartDMA enhances SPI communication in real sensor use cases.

### 4.1 SmartDMA Initialization

SmartDMA initialization is straightforward, requiring clock enablement and reset state release like other peripherals. The application encapsulates SmartDMA instructions into an array. It assigns the array address to the Boot register, allowing SmartDMA to boot and execute code from the array upon startup. As the application functions as an SPI controller, relevant parameter data must be provided before execution.

The following is the initialization code snippet:

```
// Initialize SmartDMA without firmware
SMARTDMA_InitWithoutFirmware();
// Install firmware from array
SMARTDMA_InstallFirmware(SMARTDMA_SPI_MEM_ADDR, s_smartdmaSPIFirmware,
SMARTDMA_SPI_FIRMWARE_SIZE);
// Install callback and configure interrupt
SMARTDMA_InstallCallback(SmartDMA_spi_callback, NULL);
NVIC_EnableIRQ(SMARTDMA_IRQn);
NVIC_SetPriority(SMARTDMA_IRQn, 3);
// Configure SmartDMA parameters
smartdmaParam.smartdma_stack = (uint32_t*)g_smartdma_stack;
smartdmaParam.p_reg_addr = (uint32_t*)&g_register_address;
smartdmaParam.p_write_buf = (uint32_t*)g_write_buffer;
smartdmaParam.p_read_buf = (uint32_t*)g_read_buffer;
smartdmaParam.p_data_length = (uint32_t*)&g_data_length;
smartdmaParam.p_frq_div = (uint32_t*)&g_fre_divider;
// Boot SmartDMA with firmware
g_spi_complete_flag = 1;
SMARTDMA_Boot(kSMARTDMA_spi, &smartdmaParam, 0x2);
```

The `SMARTDMA_InitWithoutFirmware` function enables the clock of the SmartDMA and releases reset. `SMARTDMA_InstallFirmware` assigns array values to SRAMX, as SmartDMA code must execute in SRAMX for efficiency. The `SMARTDMA_InstallCallback` installs callback functions when a frame of SPI data ends, SmartDMA triggers an Arm interrupt. SmartDMA implements SPI controller functionality through the firmware array `s_smartdmaSPIFirmware`, which is defined in the `fsl_smartdma_mcx.c` file.

## 4.2 SmartDMA parameter configuration

The `smartdma_param` variable defines the required parameters for configuring SmartDMA.

**Table 3. SmartDMA function parameter**

Parameter	Type	Description
<code>smartdma_stack</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	SmartDMA stack pointer: Points to the stack memory area allocated for SmartDMA.
<code>p_debugger</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	GPIO register buffer pointer: Provides access to GPIO registers for debugging purposes.
<code>p_reg_addr</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	Register address pointer: Points to the SPI target device register address.
<code>p_write_buf</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	Write buffer pointer: Points to the data buffer to be sent to the SPI target device.
<code>p_read_buf</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	Read buffer pointer: Points to the buffer for storing data received from SPI target device.
<code>p_data_length</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	Data length pointer: Points to the variable defining SPI transmission data length.
<code>p_op_cmd</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	Operation command pointer: Points to SPI operation command configuration.
<code>p_frq_div</code>	<code>uint32_t*</code>	Frequency divider pointer: Points to the variable that controls the SPI clock frequency division ratio.

## 4.3 SPI operation functions

This application primarily implements SPI read and write operations at the underlying level. Currently, the read and write operations are half-duplex, with separate read and write functions.

### 4.3.1 SPI read function brief summary

This function reads data from a specified register address on an SPI target device using SmartDMA.

The following are the operational characteristics of the SPI read function:

- Parameter validation: Checks the validity of the data buffer and data length.
- Blocking operation: Waits for the previous operation to complete before executing a new one.
- SmartDMA-driven: Uses SmartDMA to perform actual SPI communication.
- Data transfer: Copies received data from the global buffer to the user buffer after completion.
- Status return: Returns the status of the operation, indicating success or error.

Execution flow

Following the above characteristics, the SPI read function operates through the following sequence:

1. Checks the parameters.
2. Waits for any ongoing operation to complete.
3. Sets the required parameters.
4. Triggers SmartDMA to start the SPI transfer.
5. Copies the received data into the user buffer.
6. Copies the received data into the user buffer.
7. Returns the status.

4.3.2 SPI write function brief summary

This function writes data from a specified register address on an SPI target device using SmartDMA.

The following are the operational characteristics of the SPI write function:

- Parameter validation: Checks the validity of the data buffer and data length.
- Nonblocking operation: Returns immediately after triggering SmartDMA, unlike the read function.
- SmartDMA-driven: Uses SmartDMA to perform actual SPI communication.
- Data preparation: Copies user data to a global write buffer before transmission.
- Status return: Returns the status of the operation, indicating success or error status.

Execution Flow

Following the above characteristics, the SPI write function operates through the following sequence:

1. Check the parameters.
2. Wait for any previous operation to complete.
3. Copy user data into the global write buffer.
4. Set the required parameters.
5. Trigger SmartDMA to start the SPI transfer.
6. Return the status.

4.4 ICM42688 sensor operation functions

[Table 4](#) provides register-level access and configuration support for the ICM42688 sensor, enabling initialization, data readout, and parameter setup.

Table 4. Sensor operation routines

Function	Description
ICM42688_WriteReg	Clears MSB for write operation and sends 1 byte to the specified register.
ICM42688_ReadReg	Sets MSB for read operation and reads 1 byte from a specified register.
ICM42688_ReadMultipleReg	Sets MSB for read operation and reads multiple bytes starting from a specified register.

Table 4. Sensor operation routines...continued

Function	Description
ICM42688_Init	Reset the device, check the WHO_AM_I register, configure power settings, and set sensor parameters to complete initialization.
ICM42688_Reset	Performs a soft reset and waits for its completion.
ICM42688_SetAccelConfig	Set the full-scale range and output data rate for the accelerometer.
ICM42688_SetGyroConfig	Set the full-scale range and output data rate for the gyroscope.
ICM42688_ReadAccelData	Read 6 bytes and convert them into 16-bit X, Y, and Z accelerometer values.
ICM42688_ReadGyroData	Read 6 bytes and convert them into 16-bit X, Y, and Z gyroscope values.

5 Demo application

This demo application demonstrates how to interface an ICM42688 six-axis sensor with an MCU using SmartDMA to simulate SPI controller communication. The system initializes the sensor with a 2 MHz clock frequency and an 8-bit data configuration. It reads accelerometer and gyroscope data, then converts the raw values into actual measurements using sensitivity calculations. Finally, it outputs real-time acceleration and angular velocity data through UART for verification and debugging purposes.

5.1 Hardware setup

The demo application uses the following pin configuration: FRDM-MCXA346 board connects to the ICM42688 sensor through the SPI interface with SmartDMA simulating SPI controller communication.

Table 5. Hardware connection

FRDM-MCXA346 header	Header signals	SmartDMA	Sensor module	Function
J2-6	P3_11	SmartDMA_PIO11	CS	Chip select
J2-8	P3_8	SmartDMA_PIO8	MOSI	Data line from controller to target
J2-10	P3_9	SmartDMA_PIO9	MISO	Data line from target to controller
J2-12	P3_10	SmartDMA_PIO10	CLK	Clock
J2-14	GND	-	GND	Ground
J2-16	VCC	-	VCC	Power supply

This project requires an ICM42688 sensor module. If the specific model is unavailable, you can choose a functionally similar six-axis sensor module as an alternative. If the pin configuration of the new module does not match the FRDM-MCXA346 development board, use jumper wires for connection. Make sure to follow the SPI requirements—CS, MOSI, MISO, CLK, and power lines—to ensure correct pin-to-pin correspondence.

To order the FRDM-MCXA346 development board and obtain relevant specifications and pricing information, visit the NXP official website.

The image below shows the physical setup of the development board and sensor module connected to a computer through USB.



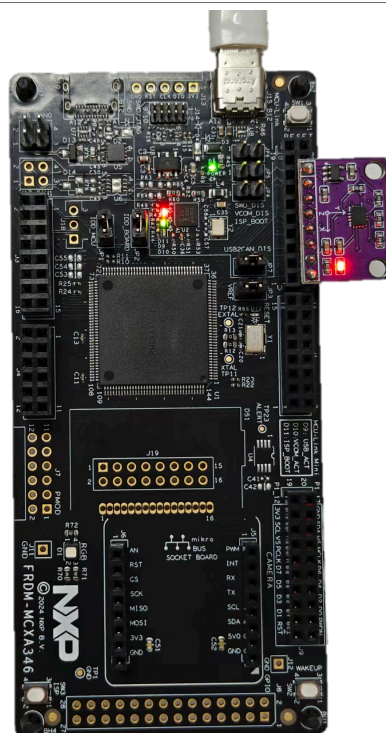


Figure 1. Demo hardware

## 5.2 Software setup and demo run

To run the demo successfully, follow the steps below:

1. Open MCUXpresso IDE.
2. Import a project from the GitHub repository.
3. Locate and open the `an-mcxa346-spi-interface-implemented-by-smartdm` project.
4. Compile the project and download it to the FRDM-MCXA346 development board.
5. Open a serial port assistant and set the baud rate to 230400.
6. To start the program, click reset. The system first calibrates and initializes the sensor, then print six-axis sensor values every second.
7. To observe changes in acceleration and angular velocity values, rotate the development board.

Below are some of the serial port output results.

```
=== SmartDMA SPI ICM42688 Example ===
Initializing ICM42688...
ICM42688 initialized successfully!
Please keep the sensor stationary and horizontal for calibration...
Auto-calibrating accelerometer... Keep sensor stationary!
Raw Z average: 2028.7 LSB (from 100 samples)
Calculated scale factor: 2028.7 LSB/g
=== Scale Factor Verification ===
Gyro range: ±2000 dps, Scale factor: 16.4 LSB/dps
Accel range: ±4g, Scale factor: 2048.0 LSB/g
Expected: Gyro ~0 dps when stationary, Accel Z ~±1g when horizontal
=====
Starting sensor data reading (1Hz)...
[0001] Accel(g): X= 0.012 Y=-0.041 Z= 1.000 | Gyro(dps): X= -0.18 Y= -0.12 Z= 0
[0002] Accel(g): X= 0.011 Y=-0.040 Z= 1.000 | Gyro(dps): X= -0.24 Y= -0.12 Z= 0
[0003] Accel(g): X= 0.013 Y=-0.041 Z= 1.000 | Gyro(dps): X= -0.24 Y= -0.06 Z= 0
```

6 Acronyms

Table 6 lists the acronyms used in this document along with their description.

Table 6. Acronyms

Acronym	Description
SPI	Serial peripheral interface
SmartDMA	Smart coprocessor
GPIO	General-purpose input/output
CPOL	Clock polarity
CPHA	Clock phase
SCLK	Serial clock
MOSI	Controller out target in
MISO	Controller in target out
SS/CS	Target select/chip select

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## 8 Revision history

[Table 7](#) summarizes revisions to this document.

Table 7. Revision history

Document ID	Release date	Description
AN14822 v1.0	30 September 2025	Initial public release

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