

1.3: The Classification of Matter

Skills to Develop

- To classify matter.

Chemists study the structures, physical properties, and chemical properties of material substances. These consist of **matter**, which is anything that occupies space and has mass. Gold and iridium are matter, as are peanuts, people, and postage stamps. Smoke, smog, and laughing gas are matter. Energy, light, and sound, however, are not matter; ideas and emotions are also not matter.

The **mass** of an object is the quantity of matter it contains. Do not confuse an object's mass with its **weight**, which is a force caused by the gravitational attraction that operates on the object. Mass is a fundamental property of an object that does not depend on its location. In physical terms, the mass of an object is directly proportional to the force required to change its speed or direction. A more detailed discussion of the differences between weight and mass and the units used to measure them is included in Essential Skills 1 (Section 1.9). Weight, on the other hand, depends on the location of an object. An astronaut whose mass is 95 kg weighs about 210 lb on Earth but only about 35 lb on the moon because the gravitational force he or she experiences on the moon is approximately one-sixth the force experienced on Earth. For practical purposes, weight and mass are often used interchangeably in laboratories. Because the force of gravity is considered to be the same everywhere on Earth's surface, 2.2 lb (a weight) equals 1.0 kg (a mass), regardless of the location of the laboratory on Earth.

Under normal conditions, there are three distinct states of matter: solids, liquids, and gases. **Solids** are relatively rigid and have fixed shapes and volumes. A rock, for example, is a solid. In contrast, **liquids** have fixed volumes but flow to assume the shape of their containers, such as a beverage in a can. **Gases**, such as air in an automobile tire, have neither fixed shapes nor fixed volumes and expand to completely fill their containers. Whereas the volume of gases strongly depends on their temperature and **pressure** (the amount of force exerted on a given area), the volumes of liquids and solids are virtually independent of temperature and pressure. Matter can often change from one physical state to another in a process called a **physical change**. For example, liquid water can be heated to form a gas called steam, or steam can be cooled to form liquid water. However, such changes of state do not affect the chemical composition of the substance.

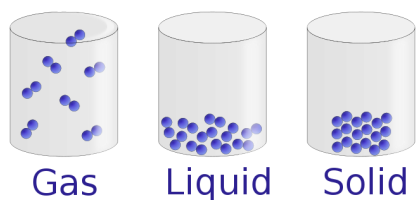


Figure 1.3.1: *The Three States of Matter. Solids have a defined shape and volume. Liquids have a fixed volume but flow to assume the shape of their containers. Gases completely fill their containers, regardless of volume. Figure used with permission from Wikipedia*

Pure Substances and Mixtures

A pure chemical substance is any matter that has a fixed chemical composition and characteristic properties. Oxygen, for example, is a pure chemical substance that is a colorless, odorless gas at 25°C. Very few samples of matter consist of pure substances; instead, most are **mixtures**, which are combinations of two or more pure substances in variable proportions in which the individual substances retain their identity. Air, tap water, milk, blue cheese, bread, and dirt are all mixtures. If all portions of a material are in the same state, have no visible boundaries, and are uniform throughout, then the material is **homogeneous**. Examples of homogeneous mixtures are the air we breathe and the tap water we drink. One type of homogeneous mixture is called a **solution**. Thus air is a solution of nitrogen, oxygen, water vapor, carbon dioxide, and several other gases; tap water is a solution of small amounts of several substances in water. The specific compositions of both of these solutions are not fixed, however, but depend on both source and location; for example, the composition of tap water in Boise, Idaho, is not the same as the composition of tap water in Buffalo, New York. Although most solutions we encounter are liquid, solutions can also be solid. The gray substance still used by some dentists to fill tooth cavities is a complex solid solution that contains 50% mercury and 50% of a powder that contains mostly silver, tin, and copper, with small amounts of zinc and mercury. Solid solutions of two or more metals are commonly called alloys.

If the composition of a material is not completely uniform, then it is **heterogeneous** (e.g., chocolate chip cookie dough, blue cheese, and dirt). Mixtures that appear to be homogeneous are often found to be heterogeneous after microscopic examination. Milk, for example, appears to be homogeneous, but when examined under a microscope, it clearly consists of tiny globules of fat and protein dispersed in water. The components of heterogeneous mixtures can usually be separated by simple means. Solid-liquid mixtures such as sand in water or tea leaves in tea are readily separated by filtration, which consists of passing the mixture through a barrier, such as a strainer, with holes or pores that are smaller than the solid particles. In principle, mixtures of two or more solids, such as sugar and salt, can be separated by microscopic inspection and sorting. More complex operations are usually necessary, though, such as when separating gold nuggets from river gravel by panning. First solid material is filtered from river water; then the solids are separated by inspection. If gold is embedded in rock, it may have to be isolated using chemical methods.



Figure 1.3.2: A Heterogeneous Mixture. Under a microscope, whole milk is actually a heterogeneous mixture composed of globules of fat and protein dispersed in water. Figure used with permission from Wikipedia

Homogeneous mixtures (solutions) can be separated into their component substances by physical processes that rely on differences in some physical property, such as differences in their boiling points. Two of these separation methods are distillation and crystallization. **Distillation** makes use of differences in volatility, a measure of how easily a substance is converted to a gas at a given temperature. A simple distillation apparatus for separating a mixture of substances, at least one of which is a liquid. The most volatile component boils first and is condensed back to a liquid in the water-cooled condenser, from which it flows into the receiving flask. If a solution of salt and water is distilled, for example, the more volatile component, pure water, collects in the receiving flask, while the salt remains in the distillation flask.

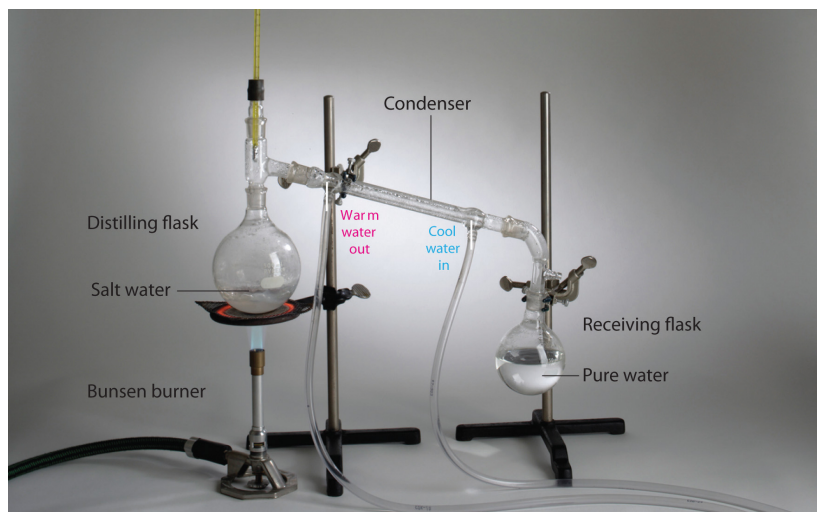


Figure 1.3.3: The Distillation of a Solution of Table Salt in Water. The solution of salt in water is heated in the distilling flask until it boils. The resulting vapor is enriched in the more volatile component (water), which condenses to a liquid in the cold condenser and is then collected in the receiving flask.

Mixtures of two or more liquids with different boiling points can be separated with a more complex distillation apparatus. One example is the refining of crude petroleum into a range of useful products: aviation fuel, gasoline, kerosene, diesel fuel, and lubricating oil (in the approximate order of decreasing volatility). Another example is the distillation of alcoholic spirits such as

brandy or whiskey. (This relatively simple procedure caused more than a few headaches for federal authorities in the 1920s during the era of Prohibition, when illegal stills proliferated in remote regions of the United States!)

Crystallization separates mixtures based on differences in solubility, a measure of how much solid substance remains dissolved in a given amount of a specified liquid. Most substances are more soluble at higher temperatures, so a mixture of two or more substances can be dissolved at an elevated temperature and then allowed to cool slowly. Alternatively, the liquid, called the solvent, may be allowed to evaporate. In either case, the least soluble of the dissolved substances, the one that is least likely to remain in solution, usually forms crystals first, and these crystals can be removed from the remaining solution by filtration.



Figure 1.3.4: The Crystallization of Sodium Acetate from a Concentrated Solution of Sodium Acetate in Water. The addition of a small “seed” crystal (a) causes the compound to form white crystals, which grow and eventually occupy most of the flask. Video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLq5NibwV5g>

Most mixtures can be separated into pure substances, which may be either elements or compounds. An **element**, such as gray, metallic sodium, is a substance that cannot be broken down into simpler ones by chemical changes; a **compound**, such as white, crystalline sodium chloride, contains atoms of two or more elements that have been chemically combined, and has chemical and physical properties that are usually different from those of the elements of which it is composed. With only a few exceptions, a particular compound has the same elemental composition (the same elements in the same proportions) regardless of its source or history. The chemical composition of a substance is altered in a process called a **chemical change**. The conversion of two or more elements, such as sodium and chlorine, to a chemical compound, sodium chloride, is an example of a chemical change, often called a chemical reaction. Currently, about 118 elements are known, but millions of chemical compounds have been prepared from these 118 elements. The known elements are listed in [the periodic table](#).

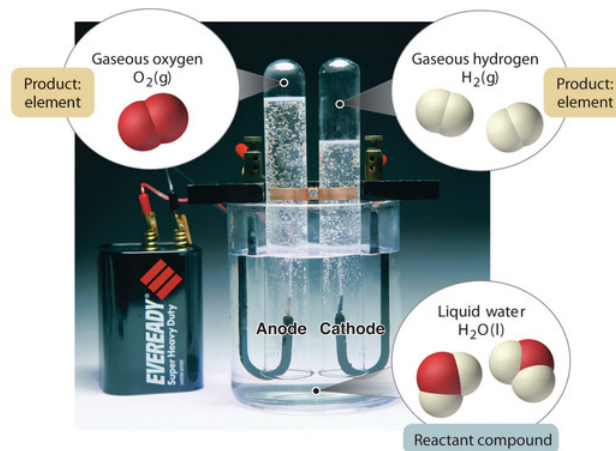


Figure 1.3.5: The Decomposition of Water to Hydrogen and Oxygen by Electrolysis. Water is a chemical compound; hydrogen and oxygen are elements.

In general, a reverse chemical process breaks down compounds into their elements. For example, water (a compound) can be decomposed into hydrogen and oxygen (both elements) by a process called electrolysis. In electrolysis, electricity provides the energy needed to separate a compound into its constituent elements (Figure 1.3.5). A similar technique is used on a vast scale to obtain pure aluminum, an element, from its ores, which are mixtures of compounds. Because a great deal of energy is required for

electrolysis, the cost of electricity is by far the greatest expense incurred in manufacturing pure aluminum. Thus recycling aluminum is both cost-effective and ecologically sound.

The overall organization of matter and the methods used to separate mixtures are summarized in Figure 1.3.6.

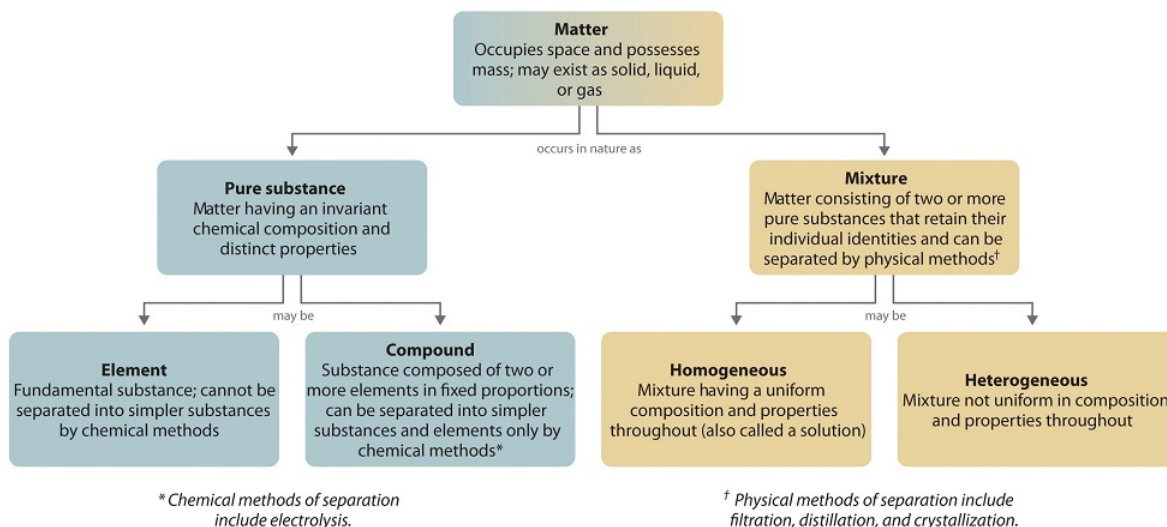


Figure 1.3.6: Relationships between the Types of Matter and the Methods Used to Separate Mixtures

Example 1.3.1

Identify each substance as a compound, an element, a heterogeneous mixture, or a homogeneous mixture (solution).

- filtered tea
- freshly squeezed orange juice
- a compact disc
- aluminum oxide, a white powder that contains a 2:3 ratio of aluminum and oxygen atoms
- selenium

Given: a chemical substance

Asked for: its classification

Strategy:

- Decide whether a substance is chemically pure. If it is pure, the substance is either an element or a compound. If a substance can be separated into its elements, it is a compound.
- If a substance is not chemically pure, it is either a heterogeneous mixture or a homogeneous mixture. If its composition is uniform throughout, it is a homogeneous mixture.

Solution:

- A** Tea is a solution of compounds in water, so it is not chemically pure. It is usually separated from tea leaves by filtration. **B** Because the composition of the solution is uniform throughout, it is a homogeneous mixture.
- A** Orange juice contains particles of solid (pulp) as well as liquid; it is not chemically pure. **B** Because its composition is not uniform throughout, orange juice is a heterogeneous mixture.
- A** A compact disc is a solid material that contains more than one element, with regions of different compositions visible along its edge. Hence a compact disc is not chemically pure. **B** The regions of different composition indicate that a compact disc is a heterogeneous mixture.
- A** Aluminum oxide is a single, chemically pure compound.
- A** Selenium is one of the known elements.

Exercise 1.3.1

Identify each substance as a compound, an element, a heterogeneous mixture, or a homogeneous mixture (solution).

- a. white wine
- b. mercury
- c. ranch-style salad dressing
- d. table sugar (sucrose)

Answer A

solution

Answer B

element

Answer C

heterogeneous mixture

Answer D

compound

Physical versus Chemical Properties

The characteristics that enable us to distinguish one substance from another are called properties. A physical property is a characteristic of matter that is not associated with a change in its chemical composition. Familiar examples of physical properties include density, color, hardness, melting and boiling points, and electrical conductivity. We can observe some physical properties, such as density and color, without changing the physical state of the matter observed. Other physical properties, such as the melting temperature of iron or the freezing temperature of water, can only be observed as matter undergoes a physical change. A physical change is a change in the state or properties of matter without any accompanying change in its chemical composition (the identities of the substances contained in the matter). We observe a physical change when wax melts, when sugar dissolves in coffee, and when steam condenses into liquid water **Figure 1.3.7**. Other examples of physical changes include magnetizing and demagnetizing metals (as is done with common antitheft security tags) and grinding solids into powders (which can sometimes yield noticeable changes in color). In each of these examples, there is a change in the physical state, form, or properties of the substance, but no change in its chemical composition.



Figure 1.3.7: (a) Wax undergoes a physical change when solid wax is heated and forms liquid wax. (b) Steam condensing inside a cooking pot is a physical change, as water vapor is changed into liquid water. (credit a: modification of work by “95jb14”/Wikimedia Commons; credit b: modification of work by “mjneuby”/Flickr).

The change of one type of matter into another type (or the inability to change) is a chemical property. Examples of chemical properties include flammability, toxicity, acidity, reactivity (many types), and heat of combustion. Iron, for example, combines with oxygen in the presence of water to form rust; chromium does not oxidize **Figure 1.3.8**. Nitroglycerin is very dangerous because it explodes easily; neon poses almost no hazard because it is very unreactive.



Figure 1.3.8: (a) One of the chemical properties of iron is that it rusts; (b) one of the chemical properties of chromium is that it does not. (credit a: modification of work by Tony Hisgett; credit b: modification of work by “Atoma”/Wikimedia Commons)

To identify a chemical property, we look for a chemical change. A chemical change always produces one or more types of matter that differ from the matter present before the change. The formation of rust is a chemical change because rust is a different kind of matter than the iron, oxygen, and water present before the rust formed. The explosion of nitroglycerin is a chemical change because the gases produced are very different kinds of matter from the original substance. Other examples of chemical changes include reactions that are performed in a lab (such as copper reacting with nitric acid), all forms of combustion (burning), and food being cooked, digested, or rotting **Figure 1.3.9**.

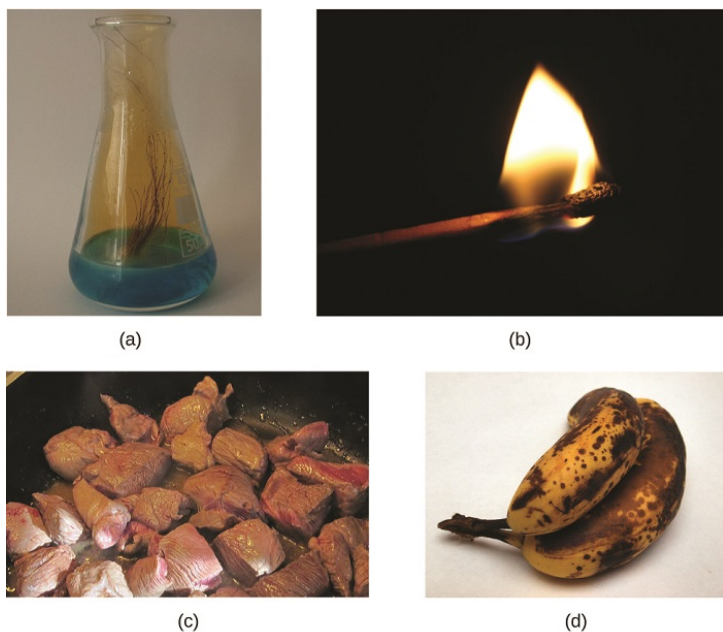


Figure 1.3.9: (a) Copper and nitric acid undergo a chemical change to form copper nitrate and brown, gaseous nitrogen dioxide. (b) During the combustion of a match, cellulose in the match and oxygen from the air undergo a chemical change to form carbon dioxide and water vapor. (c) Cooking red meat causes a number of chemical changes, including the oxidation of iron in myoglobin that results in the familiar red-to-brown color change. (d) A banana turning brown is a chemical change as new, darker (and less tasty) substances form. (credit b: modification of work by Jeff Turner; credit c: modification of work by Gloria Cabada-Leman; credit d: modification of work by Roberto Verzo)

Physical properties of matter fall into one of two categories. If the property depends on the amount of matter present, it is an **extensive** property. The mass and volume of a substance are examples of extensive properties; for instance, a gallon of milk has a larger mass and volume than a cup of milk. The value of an extensive property is directly proportional to the amount of matter in question. If the property of a sample of matter does not depend on the amount of matter present, it is an **intensive** property. Temperature is an example of an intensive property. If the gallon and cup of milk are each at 20 °C (room temperature), when they are combined, the temperature remains at 20 °C. As another example, consider the distinct but related properties of heat and temperature. A drop of hot cooking oil splattered on your arm causes brief, minor discomfort, whereas a pot of hot oil yields severe

burns. Both the drop and the pot of oil are at the same temperature (an intensive property), but the pot clearly contains much more heat (extensive property).

Summary

Matter can be classified according to physical and chemical properties. Matter is anything that occupies space and has mass. The three states of matter are solid, liquid, and gas. A physical change involves the conversion of a substance from one state of matter to another, without changing its chemical composition. Most matter consists of mixtures of pure substances, which can be homogeneous (uniform in composition) or heterogeneous (different regions possess different compositions and properties). Pure substances can be either chemical compounds or elements. Compounds can be broken down into elements by chemical reactions, but elements cannot be separated into simpler substances by chemical means. The properties of substances can be classified as either physical or chemical. Scientists can observe physical properties without changing the composition of the substance, whereas chemical properties describe the tendency of a substance to undergo chemical changes (chemical reactions) that change its chemical composition. Physical properties can be intensive or extensive. Intensive properties are the same for all samples; do not depend on sample size; and include, for example, color, physical state, and melting and boiling points. Extensive properties depend on the amount of material and include mass and volume. The ratio of two extensive properties, mass and volume, is an important intensive property called density.

Contributors

- Modified by [Joshua Halpern](#) ([Howard University](#))
- [Tom Neils](#) (Grand Rapids Community College)

1.3: The Classification of Matter is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.