

1.4: Chemistry and Society

Examples of the practical applications of chemistry are everywhere (Figure 1.4.1). Engineers need to understand the chemical properties of the substances needed to design biologically compatible implants for joint replacements; or to design roads, bridges, buildings, and nuclear reactors that do not collapse because of weakened structural materials such as steel and cement. Archeology and paleontology rely on chemical techniques to date bones and artifacts and identify their origins. Although law is not normally considered a field related to chemistry, forensic scientists use chemical methods to analyze blood, fibers, and other evidence as they investigate crimes.

In particular, DNA matching – comparing biological samples of genetic material to see whether they could have come from the same person – has been used to solve many high-profile criminal cases as well as clear innocent people who have been wrongly accused or convicted. Forensics is a rapidly growing area of applied chemistry. In addition, the proliferation of chemical and biochemical innovations in industry is producing rapid growth in the area of patent law. Ultimately, the dispersal of information in all of the fields in which chemistry plays a part requires experts who are able to explain complex chemical issues to the public through television, print journalism, the Internet, and popular books.

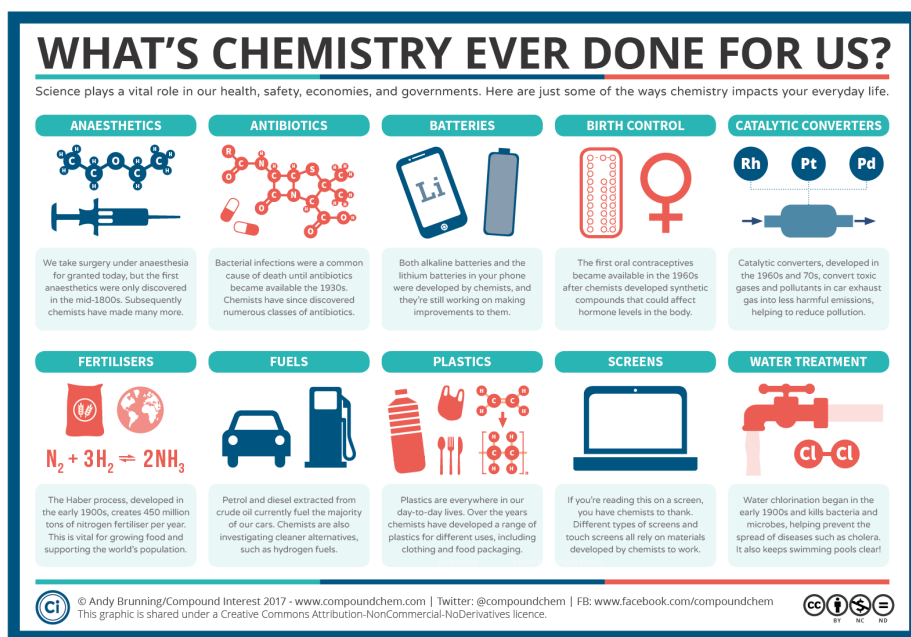


Figure 1.4.1: Chemistry and chemical compounds play an important role in almost everything around us. (Andy Brunning via compoundchem.com)

Hopefully at this point you are fully convinced of how important and useful the study of chemistry can be. You may, however, still be wondering exactly *what* it is that a chemist does. Chemistry is the study of matter and the changes that matter undergoes. In general, chemists are interested in both characteristics that you can test and observe, like a chemical's smell or color, and characteristics that are far too small to see, like what the oxygen you inhale or the carbon dioxide you exhale looks like under a microscope 1,000 times more powerful than any existing in the world today.

How can a chemist *know* what oxygen and carbon dioxide look like under a microscope that doesn't even exist? What happened to the [scientific method](#)? What happened to relying on *observations* and *careful measurements*? In fact, because chemists *can't* see the underlying structure of different materials, they have to rely on the scientific method even more! Chemists are a lot like detectives. Suppose a detective is trying to solve a murder case – what do they do? Obviously, the detective starts by visiting the site of the crime and looking for evidence. If the murderer has left enough clues behind, the detective can piece together a theory explaining what happened.

Even though the detective wasn't at the crime scene when the crime was committed and didn't actually see the murderer kill the victim, with the right evidence the detective can be pretty sure of how the crime took place. It is the same with chemistry. When chemists go into the laboratory, they collect evidence by making measurements. Once chemists have collected enough clues from the properties that they can observe, they use that evidence to piece together a theory explaining the properties that they cannot observe – the properties that are too small to see.

Scientific Method

Chemists use the scientific method, which is a process of establishing facts through testing and experimentation. The basic process involves asking a question, forming a hypothesis, conducting an experiment, and then analyzing the results.

What kinds of properties do chemists actually measure in the laboratory? Well, you can probably guess a few. Imagine that you go to dinner at a friend's house and are served something that you don't recognize, what types of observations might you make to determine exactly *what* you've been given? You might smell the food. You might note the color of the food. You might try to decide whether the food is a liquid or a solid because if it's a liquid, it's probably soup or a drink. The temperature of the food could be useful if you wanted to know whether or not you had been served ice cream! You could also pick up a small amount of food with your fork and try to figure out how much it weighs – a light dessert might be something like an angel cake, while a heavy dessert is probably a pound cake. The quantity of food you have been given might be a clue too. Finally, you might want to know something about the food's texture – is it hard and granular like sugar cubes, or soft and easy to spread, like butter?

Believe it or not, the observations you are likely to make when trying to identify an unknown food are very similar to the observations that a chemist makes when trying to learn about a new material. Chemists rely on smell, color, state (whether it is a solid or liquid or gas), temperature, volume, mass (which is related to weight – as will be discussed in a later section), and texture. There is, however, one property possibly used to learn about a food, but that should *definitely* not be used to learn about a chemical – taste!

In the sections on the Atomic Theory, you will see exactly how measurements of certain properties helped early scientists to develop theories about the chemical structure of matter on a scale much smaller than they could ever hope to see. You will also learn how these theories, in turn, allow us to make predictions about new materials that humankind has not yet created.

The video below gives you some important tips on how to study chemistry in this class. With practice, you too can learn to think like a chemist, and you may even enjoy it!



Video 1.4.1: How To Study Chemistry.

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