

13.4: Le Chatelier's Principle

Learning Outcomes

- Define Le Chatelier's principle.
- Predict how the change in amounts of substances, temperature, or pressure will affect amounts of reactants and products present at equilibrium.

Le Chatelier's Principle

Chemical equilibrium was studied by the French chemist Henri Le Chatelier (1850 - 1936) and his description of how a system responds to a stress to equilibrium has become known as **Le Chatelier's principle**: When a chemical system that is at equilibrium is disturbed by a stress, the system will respond in order to relieve the stress. Stresses to a chemical system involve changes in the concentrations of reactants or products, changes in the temperature of the system, or changes in the pressure of the system. We will discuss each of these stresses separately. The change to the equilibrium position in every case is either a favoring of the forward reaction or a favoring of the reverse reaction. When the forward reaction is favored, the concentrations of products increase, while the concentrations of reactants decrease. When the reverse reaction is favored, the concentrations of the products decrease, while the concentrations of reactants increase.

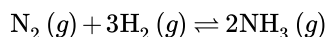
Original Equilibrium	Favored Reaction	Result
$A \rightleftharpoons B$	Forward: $A \rightarrow B$	$[A]$ decreases; $[B]$ increases
$A \rightleftharpoons B$	Reverse: $A \leftarrow B$	$[A]$ increases; $[B]$ decreases



Figure 9.6.1: Henri Le Chatelier.

Effect of Concentration

A change in concentration of one of the substances in an equilibrium system typically involves either the addition or the removal of one of the reactants or products. Consider the Haber-Bosch process for the industrial production of ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen gases.



If the concentration of one substance in a system is increased, the system will respond by favoring the reaction that removes that substance. When more N_2 is added, the forward reaction will be favored because the forward reaction uses up N_2 and converts it to NH_3 . The forward reaction speeds up temporarily as a result of the addition of a reactant. The position of equilibrium shifts as more NH_3 is produced. The concentration of NH_3 increases, while the concentrations of N_2 and H_2 decrease. After some time passes, equilibrium is reestablished with new concentrations of all three substance. As can be seen in the figure below, if more N_2 is added, a new equilibrium is achieved by the system. The new concentration of NH_3 is higher because of the favoring of the forward reaction. The new concentration of the H_2 is lower. The concentration of N_2 is higher than in the original equilibrium, but went down slightly following the addition of the N_2 that disturbed the original equilibrium. By responding in this way, the value of the equilibrium constant for the reaction, K_{eq} , does not change as a result of the stress to the system.

In other words, the amount of each substance is different but the ratio of the amount of each remains the same.

If more NH_3 were added, the reverse reaction would be favored. This "favoring" of a reaction means temporarily speeding up the reaction in that direction until equilibrium is reestablished. Recall that once equilibrium is reestablished, the rates of the forward and reverse reactions are again equal. The addition of NH_3 would result in increased formation of the reactants, N_2 and H_2 .

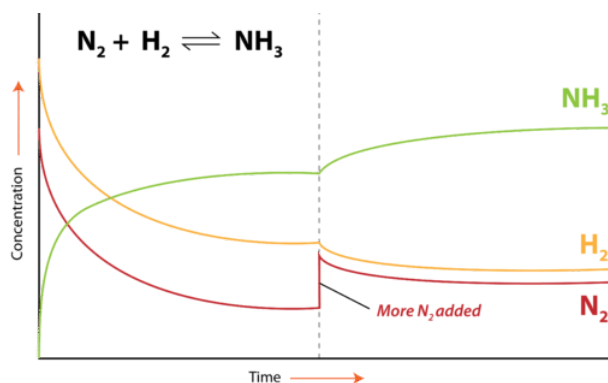


Figure 9.6.2: The Haber-Bosch process is an equilibrium between reactants N_2 and H_2 and product NH_3 .

An equilibrium can also be disrupted by the removal of one of the substances. If the concentration of a substance is decreased, the system will respond by favoring the reaction that replaces that substance. In the industrial Haber-Bosch process, NH_3 is removed from the equilibrium system as the reaction proceeds. As a result, the forward reaction is favored so that more NH_3 is produced. The concentrations of N_2 and H_2 decrease. Continued removal of NH_3 will eventually force the reaction to go to completion until all of the reactants are used up. If either N_2 or H_2 were removed from the equilibrium system, the reverse reaction would be favored and the concentration of NH_3 would decrease.

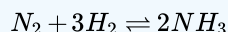
The effect of changes in concentration on an equilibrium system according to Le Chatelier's principle is summarized in the table below.

Table 9.6.1

Stress	Response
addition of reactant	forward reaction favored
addition of product	reverse reaction favored
removal of reactant	reverse reaction favored
removal of product	forward reaction favored

✓ Example 13.4.1

Given this reaction at equilibrium:



How will it affect the reaction if the equilibrium is stressed by each change?

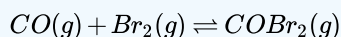
1. H_2 is added.
2. NH_3 is added.
3. NH_3 is removed.

Solution

1. If H_2 is added, there is now more reactant, so the reaction will shift to the right (toward products) to reduce the added H_2 .
2. If NH_3 is added, there is now more product, so the reaction will shift to the left (toward reactants) to reduce the added NH_3 .
3. If NH_3 is removed, there is now less product, so the reaction will shift to the right (toward products) to replace the product removed.

Exercise

Given this reaction at equilibrium:



How will it affect the reaction if the equilibrium is stressed by each change?

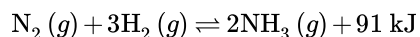
1. Br₂ is removed.
2. COBr₂ is added.

Answer

1. shift to the left (toward reactants)
2. shift to the left (toward reactants)

Effect of Temperature

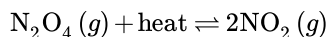
Increasing or decreasing the temperature of a system at equilibrium is also a stress to the system. The equation for the Haber-Bosch process is written again below, as a thermochemical equation (i.e. it contains information about the energy gained or lost when the reaction occurs).



The forward reaction is the exothermic direction: the formation of NH₃ releases heat which is why that is shown as a product. The reverse reaction is the endothermic direction: as NH₃ decomposes to N₂ and H₂, heat is absorbed. An increase in the temperature for this is like adding a product because heat is being released by the reaction. If we add a product then the reaction proceeds towards the formation of more reactants. Reducing the temperature for this system would be similar to removing a product which would favor the formation of more products. The amount of NH₃ will increase and the amount of N₂ and H₂ will decrease.

For changes in concentration, the system responds in such a way that the value of the equilibrium constant, K_{eq} is unchanged. However, a change in temperature shifts the equilibrium and the K_{eq} value either increases or decreases. As discussed in the previous section, values of K_{eq} are dependent on the temperature. When the temperature of the system for the Haber-Bosch process is increased, the resultant shift in equilibrium towards the reactants means that the K_{eq} value decreases. When the temperature is decreased, the shift in equilibrium towards the products means that the K_{eq} value increases.

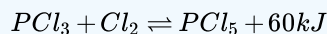
Le Chatelier's principle as related to temperature changes can be illustrated easily by the reaction in which dinitrogen tetroxide is in equilibrium with nitrogen dioxide.



Dinitrogen tetroxide (N₂O₄) is colorless, while nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) is dark brown in color. When N₂O₄ breaks down into NO₂, heat is absorbed (endothermic) according to the forward reaction above. Therefore, an increase in temperature (adding heat) of the system will favor the forward reaction. Conversely, a decrease in temperature (removing heat) will favor the reverse reaction.

✓ Example 13.4.2

Predict the effect of increasing the temperature on this equilibrium.



Solution

Because energy is listed as a product, it is being produced, so the reaction is exothermic. If the temperature is increasing, a product is being added to the equilibrium, so the equilibrium shifts to minimize the addition of extra product: it shifts to the left (back toward reactants).

Exercise

Predict the effect of decreasing the temperature on this equilibrium.



Answer

Equilibrium shifts to the left (toward reactants).

Effect of Pressure

Changing the pressure of an equilibrium system in which gases are involved is also a stress to the system. A change in the pressure on a liquid or a solid has a negligible effect. We will return again the equilibrium for the Haber-Bosch process. Imagine the gases are contained in a closed system in which the volume of the system is controlled by an adjustable piston as shown in the figure below.

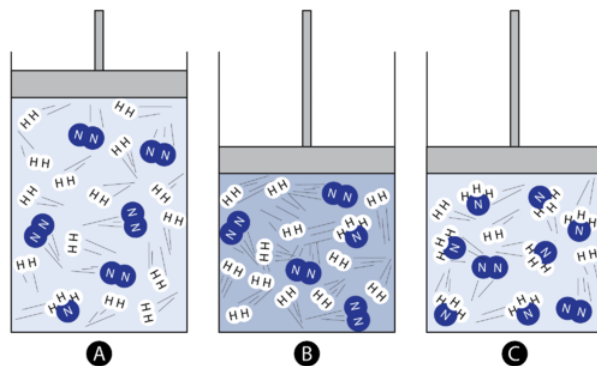


Figure 9.6.3: Effect of pressure on equilibrium. (A) is at equilibrium, (B) increase of pressure through decreased volume, and (C) equilibrium is reestablished.

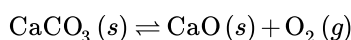
On the far left, the reaction system contains primarily N₂ and H₂, with only one molecule of NH₃ present. As the piston is pushed inwards, the pressure of the system increases according to Boyle's law. This is a stress to the equilibrium. In the middle image, the same number of molecules is now confined in a smaller space and so the pressure has increased. According to Le Chatelier's principle, the system responds in order to relieve the stress. In the image on the right, the forward reaction has been favored and more NH₃ is produced. The overall result is a decrease in the number of gas molecules in the entire system. This in turn decreases the pressure and provides a relief to the original stress of a pressure increase. An increase in pressure on an equilibrium system favors the reaction which products fewer total moles of gas. In this case, it is the forward reaction that is favored.

A decrease in pressure on the above system could be achieved by pulling the piston outward, increasing the container volume. The equilibrium would respond by favoring the reverse reaction in which NH₃ decomposes to N₂ and H₂. This is because the overall number of gas molecules would increase and so would the pressure. A decrease in pressure on an equilibrium system favors the reaction which produces more total moles of gas. This is summarized in the table below.

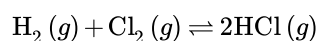
Table 9.6.2

Stress	Response
pressure increase	reaction produces fewer gas molecules
pressure decrease	reaction produces more gas molecules

Like changes in concentration, the K_{eq} value for a given reaction is unchanged by a change in pressure. The amounts of each substance will change but the ratio will not. It is important to remember when analyzing the effect of a pressure change on equilibrium that only gases are affected. If a certain reaction involves liquids or solids, they should be ignored. For example, calcium carbonate decomposes according to the equilibrium reaction:

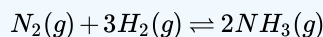


Oxygen is the only gas in the system. An increase in the pressure of the system slows the rate of decomposition of CaCO₃ because the reverse reaction is favored. When a system contains equal moles of gas on both sides of the equation, pressure has no effect on the equilibrium position, as in the formation of HCl from H₂ and Cl₂.



✓ Example 13.4.3

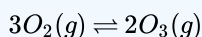
What is the effect on this equilibrium if pressure is increased?

**Solution**

According to Le Chatelier's principle, if pressure is increased, then the equilibrium shifts to the side with the fewer number of moles of gas. This particular reaction shows a total of 4 mol of gas as reactants and 2 mol of gas as products, so the reaction shifts to the right (toward the products side).

Exercise

What is the effect on this equilibrium if pressure is decreased?

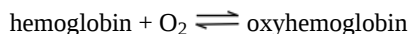
**Answer**

Reaction shifts to the left (toward reactants).

Application of Le Chatelier's Principle

Oxygen transport by the blood

In aerobic respiration, oxygen is transported to the cells where it is combined with glucose and metabolized to carbon dioxide, which then moves back to the lungs from which it is expelled.



The partial pressure of O_2 in the air is 0.2 atm, sufficient to allow these molecules to be taken up by hemoglobin (the red pigment of blood) in which it becomes loosely bound in a complex known as oxyhemoglobin. At the ends of the capillaries which deliver the blood to the tissues, the O_2 concentration is reduced by about 50% owing to its consumption by the cells. This shifts the equilibrium to the left, releasing the oxygen so it can diffuse into the cells.

Key Takeaways

- In a reaction at equilibrium, the introduction of more products will shift the mass balance towards more reactants, and the introduction of more reactants will lead to the formation of more products, but the *ratio of Products/Reactants (equilibrium constant)*, K is unchanged.
- If temperature is changed, the numeric value K will change. If a reaction is *exothermic* (releases heat), an increase in the **temperature** will force the equilibrium to the left, causing the system to absorb heat and thus partially offsetting the rise in temperature. The opposite effect occurs for *endothermic* reactions, which are shifted to the right by rising temperature.
- The effect of **pressure** on an equilibrium is significant only for reactions which involve different numbers of moles of gases on the two sides of the equation. An increase in the total pressure will shift to the side with fewer moles of gas. A decrease in pressure will shift to the side with more moles of gas.

Contributors and Attributions

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