

4.6: How to Name Compounds

Knowing how to name a compound correctly is an important skill both for the remainder of this course, and as you move into other fields. Many compounds have long names which differ only by a single letter. But that single letter makes a big difference in the properties of those compounds. For example, sodium chloride is something that you might use in food preparation, but sodium chlorite might explode if mixed with certain foods! Likewise, in the medical fields there are many drugs with long and sometimes similar names. Being able to distinguish between different chemical names is a safety issue.

In history, the first names for a particular element or compound was generally invented by whomever discovered it. As you can imagine, as many more compounds were discovered, this became a bit confusing. In 1787, Antoine Lavoisier tried to improve the situation by publishing a book of "New Chemical Nomenclature", which attempted to bring all chemical names into a common system of naming, that could be consistent and more easily learned. Today, this is primarily done by a group called the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemists (IUPAC). Their naming recommendations relevant to introductory and general chemistry are recorded in what they call the "Red Book", which can be accessed at [the IUPAC website](#). Modern day chemists and students primarily follow these rules, but if you look and listen closely, you may find that even chemistry professors and chemical industry suppliers are slow to adopt modern recommendations.

The most important step in naming a chemical is determining which category that chemical belongs in. As you read the sections on how to name different types of chemicals, please recognize the importance of these chemical classifications. [A previous section in this chapter discussed how we categorize compounds](#). These are the same categories we will be using as we name compounds. Pay attention to these categories as you're naming chemicals.

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