

5.2: REACTION MECHANISM NOTATION AND SYMBOLS

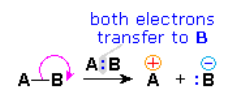
Learning Objective

- accurately and precisely use reaction mechanism notation and symbols including curved arrows to show the flow of electrons

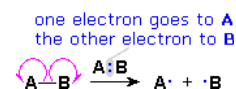
The Arrow Notation in Mechanisms

Since chemical reactions involve the breaking and making of bonds, a consideration of the movement of bonding (and non-bonding) valence shell electrons is essential to this understanding. It is now common practice to show the movement of electrons with curved arrows, and a sequence of equations depicting the consequences of such electron shifts is termed a **mechanism**. In general, two kinds of curved arrows are used in drawing mechanisms:

A full head on the arrow indicates the movement or shift of an electron pair:

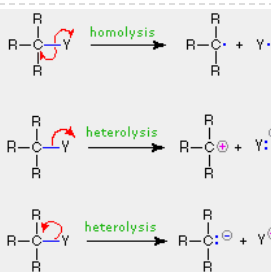


A partial head (fishhook) on the arrow indicates the shift of a single electron:

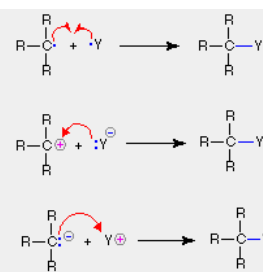


The use of these symbols in bond-breaking and bond-making reactions is illustrated below. If a covalent single bond is broken so that one electron of the shared pair remains with each fragment, as in the first example, this bond-breaking is called **homolysis**. If the bond breaks with both electrons of the shared pair remaining with one fragment, as in the second and third examples, this is called **heterolysis**.

Bond-Breaking



Bond-Making



OTHER ARROW SYMBOLS

Chemists also use arrow symbols for other purposes, and it is essential to use them correctly.

The Reaction Arrow



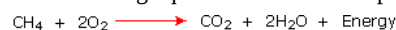
The Equilibrium Arrow



The Resonance Arrow



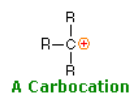
The following equations illustrate the proper use of these symbols:



REACTIVE INTERMEDIATES

The products of bond breaking, shown above, are not stable in the usual sense, and cannot be isolated for prolonged study. Such species are referred to as **reactive intermediates**, and are believed to be transient intermediates in many reactions. The general structures and names of four such intermediates are given below.

Charged Intermediates



A Carbocation



A Carbanion

Uncharged Intermediates



A Radical



A Carbene

A pair of widely used terms, related to the Lewis acid-base notation, should also be introduced here.

- Electrophile: An electron deficient atom, ion or molecule that has an affinity for an electron pair, and will bond to a base or nucleophile.
- Nucleophile: An atom, ion or molecule that has an electron pair that may be donated in bonding to an electrophile (or Lewis acid).

Using these definitions, it is clear that carbocations (called carbonium ions in the older literature) are electrophiles and carbanions are nucleophiles. Carbenes have only a valence shell sextet of electrons and are therefore electron deficient. In this sense they are electrophiles, but the non-bonding electron pair also gives carbenes nucleophilic character. As a rule, the electrophilic character dominates carbene reactivity. Carbon radicals have only seven valence electrons, and may be considered electron deficient; however, they do not in general bond to nucleophilic electron pairs, so their chemistry exhibits unique differences from that of conventional electrophiles. Radical intermediates are often called **free radicals**.

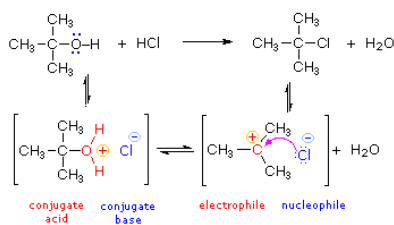
The importance of electrophile / nucleophile terminology comes from the fact that many organic reactions involve at some stage the bonding of a nucleophile to an electrophile, a process that generally leads to a stable intermediate or product. Reactions of this kind are sometimes called **ionic reactions**, since ionic reactants or products are often involved. Some common examples of ionic reactions and their mechanisms may be examined below.

The shapes ideally assumed by these intermediates becomes important when considering the stereochemistry of reactions in which they play a role. A simple tetravalent compound like methane, CH_4 , has a tetrahedral configuration. Carbocations have only three bonds to the charge bearing carbon, so it adopts a planar trigonal configuration. Carbanions are pyramidal in shape (tetrahedral if the electron pair is viewed as a substituent), but these species invert rapidly at room temperature, passing through a higher energy planar form in which the electron pair occupies a p-orbital. Radicals are intermediate in configuration, the energy difference between pyramidal and planar forms being very small. Since three points determine a plane, the shape of carbenes must be planar; however, the valence electron distribution varies.

IONIC REACTIONS

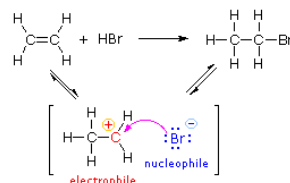
The principles and terms introduced in the previous sections can now be summarized and illustrated by the following three examples. Reactions such as these are called **ionic** or **polar** reactions, because they often involve charged species and the bonding together of **electrophiles and nucleophiles**. Ionic reactions normally take place in liquid solutions, where solvent molecules assist the formation of charged intermediates.

substitution



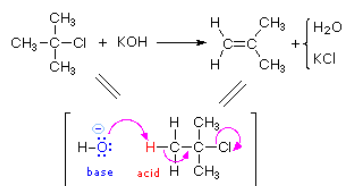
The substitution reaction shown on the left can be viewed as taking place in three steps. The first is an acid-base equilibrium, in which HCl protonates the oxygen atom of the alcohol. The resulting conjugate acid then loses water in a second step to give a carbocation intermediate. Finally, this electrophile combines with the chloride anion nucleophile to give the final product.

addition



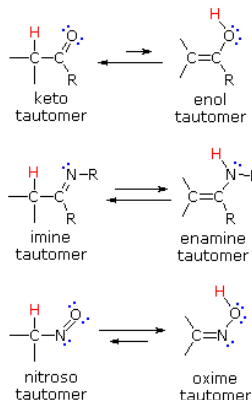
The addition reaction shown on the left can be viewed as taking place in two steps. The first step can again be considered an acid-base equilibrium, with the pi-electrons of the carbon-carbon double bond functioning as a base. The resulting conjugate acid is a carbocation, and this electrophile combines with the nucleophilic bromide anion.

elimination



The elimination reaction shown on the left takes place in one step. The bond breaking and making operations that take place in this step are described by the curved arrows. The initial stage may also be viewed as an acid-base interaction, with hydroxide ion serving as the base and a hydrogen atom component of the alkyl chloride as an acid.

rearrangement (tautomerism)



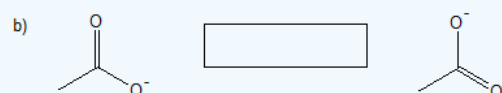
There are many kinds of molecular rearrangements called isomerizations. The examples shown on the left are from an important class called **tautomerization** or, more specifically, keto-enol tautomerization. Tautomers are rapidly interconverted constitutional isomers, usually distinguished by a different bonding location for a labile hydrogen atom (colored red here) and a differently located double bond. The equilibrium between tautomers is not only rapid under normal conditions, but it often strongly favors one of the isomers (acetone, for example, is 99.999% keto tautomer). Even in such one-sided equilibria, evidence for the presence of the minor tautomer comes from the chemical behavior of the compound. Tautomeric equilibria are catalyzed by traces of acids or bases that are generally present in most chemical samples.

Exercise

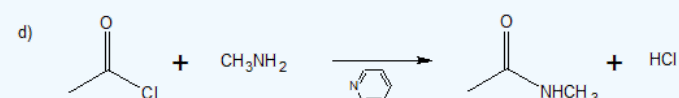
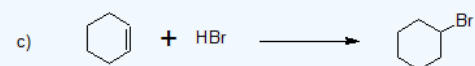
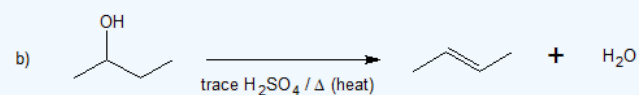
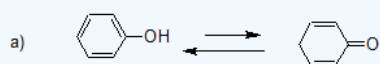
1. Add curved arrows to explain the indicated reactivity and classify the reaction as "homolytic cleavage" or "heterolytic cleavage".



2. Add the correct arrow to each expression below using your knowledge of chemistry.

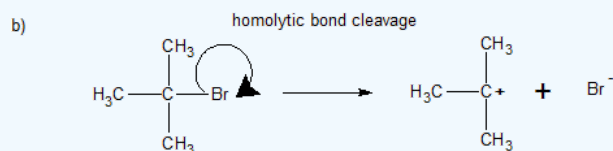
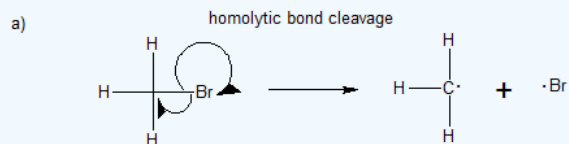


3. Classify the following reactions as substitution, addition, elimination, or tautomerization (an example of isomerization).

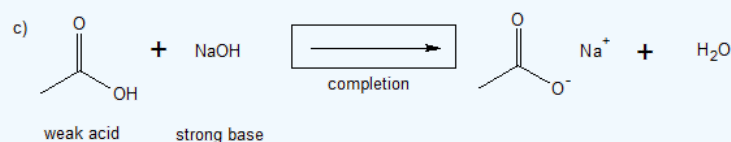
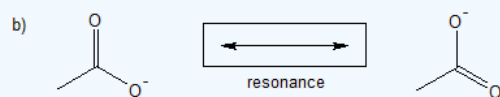
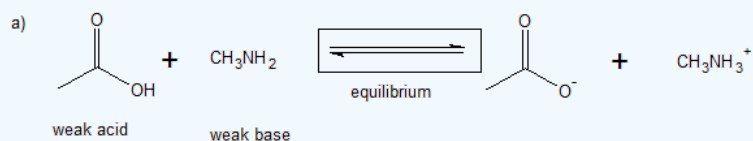


Answer

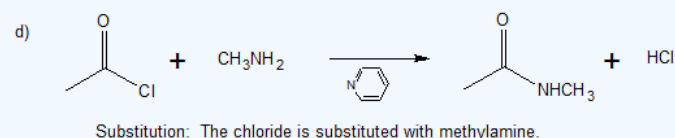
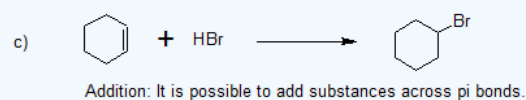
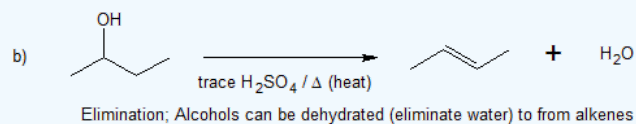
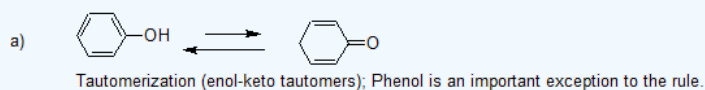
1.



2.



3.



CONTRIBUTORS AND ATTRIBUTIONS

- Dr. Dietmar Kennepohl FCIC (Professor of Chemistry, [Athabasca University](#))
- Prof. Steven Farmer ([Sonoma State University](#))
- William Reusch, Professor Emeritus ([Michigan State U.](#)), [Virtual Textbook of Organic Chemistry](#)

