

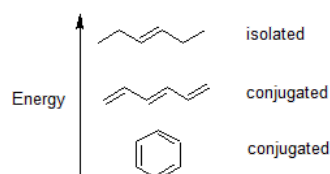
2.4: 2.4 CONJUGATED PI BOND SYSTEMS

Learning Objective

- recognize conjugated pi bond systems
- recognize that benzene is aromatic

Introduction

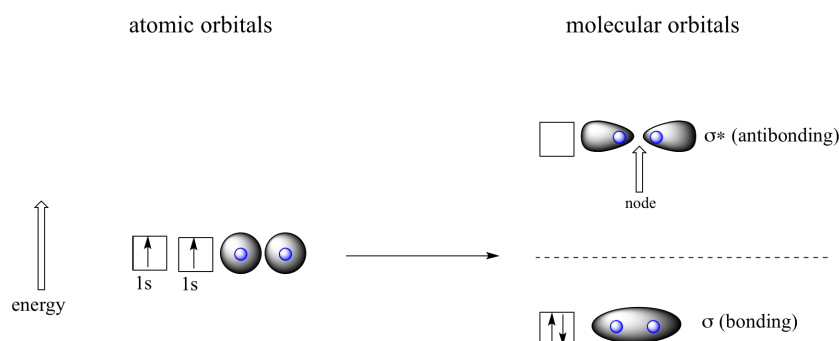
It is important to train our eye to recognize structural features that have stabilizing effects. Alternating single and double bonds create a conjugated pi bond system across multiple atoms that lowers the energy and stabilizes the molecule or ion. When we look at carbon-carbon double bonds (C=C), we need to look and see if they are isolated or conjugated.



To understand the source of this stabilization we will use molecular orbital (MO) theory. Valence bond theory does a remarkably good job at explaining the bonding geometry of many of the functional groups in organic compounds, however, it fails to adequately account for the stability contained in alternating double and single bonds. In order to understand these properties, we will use the ideas of MO theory.

Let's go back and consider again the simplest possible covalent bond: the one in molecular hydrogen (H_2). When we described the hydrogen molecule using valence bond theory, we said that the two 1s orbitals from each atom overlap, allowing the two electrons to be shared and thus forming a covalent bond. In molecular orbital theory, we make a further statement: we say that the two atomic 1s orbitals mathematically combine to form two new orbitals. Recall that an atomic orbital (such as the 1s orbital of a hydrogen atom) describes a region of space around a single atom inside which electrons are likely to be found. *A molecular orbital describes a region of space around two or more atoms inside which electrons are likely to be found.*

Mathematical principles tell us that when orbitals combine, the number of orbitals before the combination takes place must equal the number of new orbitals that result from the combination – orbitals don't just disappear! We saw this previously when we discussed hybrid orbitals: one s and three p orbitals make four sp^3 hybrids. When two atomic 1s orbitals combine in the formation of H_2 , the result is two **sigma (σ) orbitals**.



Molecular orbitals for H_2

According to MO theory, one sigma orbital is lower in energy than either of the two isolated atomic 1s orbitals –this lower sigma orbital is referred to as a **bonding molecular orbital**. The second, '**sigma star**' orbital is higher in energy than the two atomic 1s orbitals, and is referred to as an **antibonding molecular orbital**.

The bonding sigma orbital, which holds both electrons in the ground state of the molecule, is egg-shaped, encompassing the two nuclei, and with the highest likelihood of electrons being in the area between the two nuclei. The high-energy, antibonding sigma* orbital can be visualized as a pair of droplets, with areas of higher electron density near each nucleus and a 'node', (area of zero electron density) midway between the two nuclei.

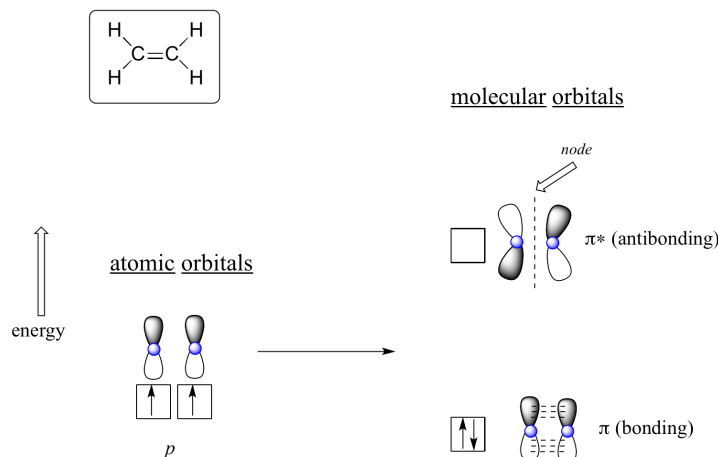
Remember that we are thinking here about electron behavior as *wave behavior*. When two separate waves combine, they can do so with **constructive interference**, where the two amplitudes build up and reinforce one another, or **destructive interference**, where the two

amplitudes cancel one another out. Bonding MOs are the consequence of constructive interference between two atomic orbitals, which results in an attractive interaction and an increase in electron density between the nuclei. Antibonding MO's are the consequence of destructive interference which results in a repulsive interaction and a region of zero electron density between the nuclei (in other words, a node).

Following the same *aufbau* ('building up') principle you learned in General Chemistry for writing out electron configurations, we place the two electrons in the H_2 molecule in the lowest energy molecular orbital, which is the (bonding) sigma orbital. The bonding (attracting) MO is full, and the antibonding (repulsing) MO is empty.

MO THEORY AND CONJUGATED PI BONDS

The advantage of using MO theory to understand bonding in organic molecules becomes more apparent when we think about pi bonds. Let's first consider the pi bond in ethene from an MO theory standpoint (in this example we will be disregarding the s bonds in the molecule, and thinking *only* about the π bond). We start with two atomic orbitals: one unhybridized 2p orbital from each carbon. Each contains a single electron. In MO theory, the two atomic combine mathematically to form two **pi molecular orbitals**, one a low-energy pi bonding orbital and one a high-energy pi* antibonding orbital.



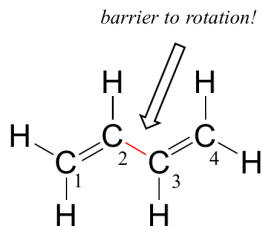
Molecular orbitals for ethene (ethylene)

In the bonding pi orbital, the two shaded lobes of the p orbitals interact *constructively* with each other, as do the two unshaded lobes (remember, the arbitrary shading choice represents mathematical (+) and (-) signs for the mathematical wavefunction describing the orbital). There is increased electron density between the two carbon nuclei in the molecular orbital - it is a bonding interaction.

In the higher-energy antibonding pi* orbital, the shaded lobe of one p orbital interacts *destructively* with the unshaded lobe of the second p orbital, leading to a node between the two nuclei and overall repulsion between the carbon nuclei.

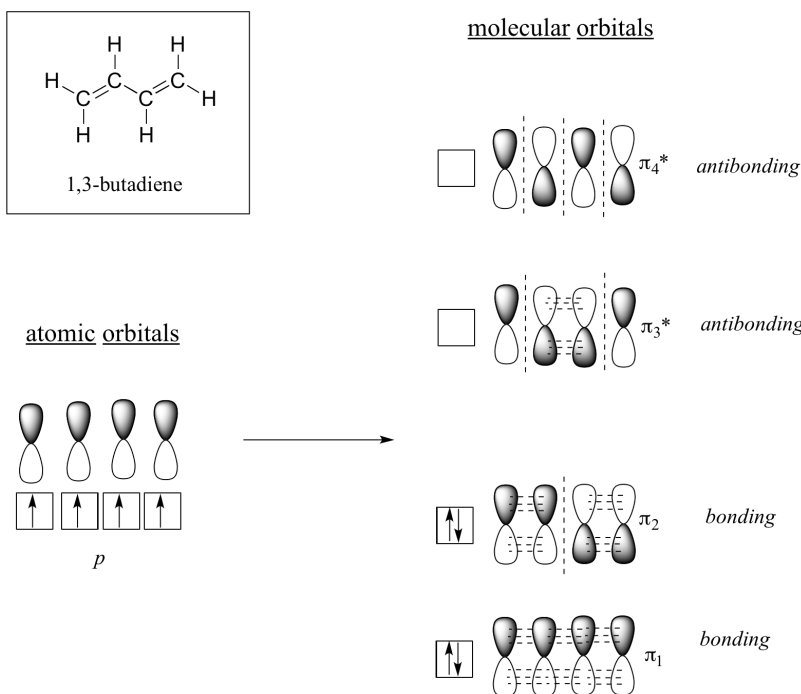
Again using the 'building up' principle, we place the two electrons in the lower-energy, bonding pi molecular orbital. The antibonding pi* orbital remains empty.

Next, we'll consider the 1,3-butadiene molecule. From valence orbital theory alone we might expect that the C_2-C_3 bond in this molecule, because it is a sigma bond, would be able to rotate freely.



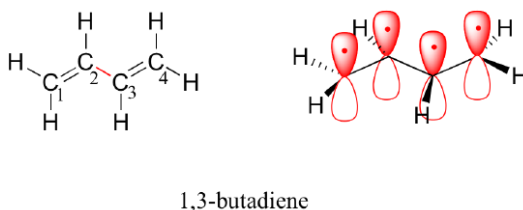
Experimentally, however, it is observed that there is a significant barrier to rotation about the C_2-C_3 bond, and that the entire molecule is planar. In addition, the C_2-C_3 bond is 148 pm long, shorter than a typical carbon-carbon single bond (about 154 pm), though longer than a typical double bond (about 134 pm).

Molecular orbital theory accounts for these observations with the concept of **delocalized pi bonds**. In this picture, the four 2p atomic orbitals combine mathematically to form four pi molecular orbitals of increasing energy. Two of these - the bonding pi orbitals - are lower in energy than the p atomic orbitals from which they are formed, while two - the antibonding pi* orbitals - are higher in energy.



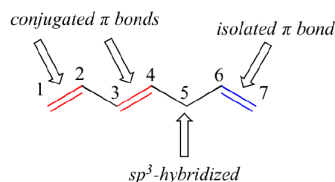
The lowest energy molecular orbital, π_1 , has only constructive interaction and zero nodes. Higher in energy, but still lower than the isolated p orbitals, the π_2 orbital has one node but two constructive interactions - thus it is still a bonding orbital overall. Looking at the two antibonding orbitals, π_3^* has two nodes and one constructive interaction, while π_4^* has three nodes and zero constructive interactions.

By the *aufbau* principle, the four electrons from the isolated $2p_z$ atomic orbitals are placed in the bonding π_1 and π_2 MO's. Because π_1 includes constructive interaction between C_2 and C_3 , there is a degree, in the 1,3-butadiene molecule, of π -bonding interaction between these two carbons, which accounts for its shorter length and the barrier to rotation. The valence bond picture of 1,3-butadiene shows the two π bonds as being isolated from one another, with each pair of π electrons 'stuck' in its own π bond. However, molecular orbital theory predicts (accurately) that the four π electrons are to some extent delocalized, or 'spread out', over the whole π system.

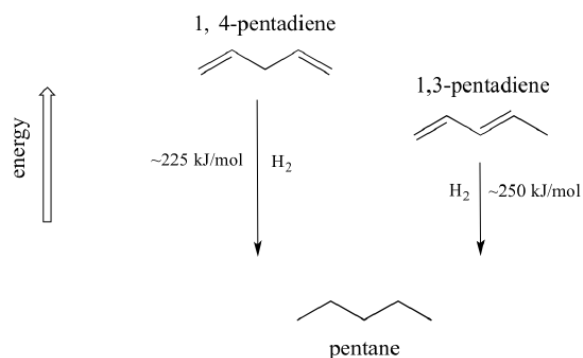


space-filling view

1,3-butadiene is the simplest example of a system of **conjugated pi bonds**. To be considered conjugated, two or more π bonds must be separated by only one single bond - in other words, there cannot be an intervening sp^3 -hybridized carbon, because this would break up the overlapping system of parallel p orbitals. In the compound below, for example, the C_1 - C_2 and C_3 - C_4 double bonds are conjugated, while the C_6 - C_7 double bond is **isolated** from the other two π bonds by sp^3 -hybridized C_5 .

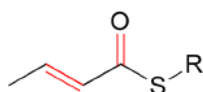


A very important concept to keep in mind is that *there is an inherent thermodynamic stability associated with conjugation*. This stability can be measured experimentally by comparing the **heat of hydrogenation** of two different dienes. (Hydrogenation is a reaction type that we will learn much more about in chapter 15: essentially, it is the process of adding a hydrogen molecule - two protons and two electrons - to a π bond). When the two *conjugated* double bonds of 1,3-pentadiene are 'hydrogenated' to produce pentane, about 225 kJ is released per mole of pentane formed. Compare that to the approximately 250 kJ/mol released when the two *isolated* double bonds in 1,4-pentadiene are hydrogenated, also forming pentane.

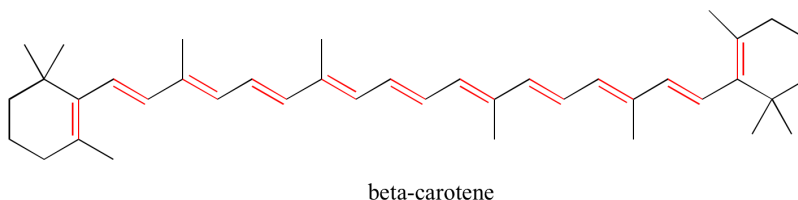


The conjugated diene is lower in energy: in other words, it is more stable. In general, conjugated pi bonds are more stable than isolated pi bonds.

Conjugated pi systems can involve oxygen and nitrogen atoms as well as carbon. In the metabolism of fat molecules, some of the key reactions involve alkenes that are conjugated to carbonyl groups.



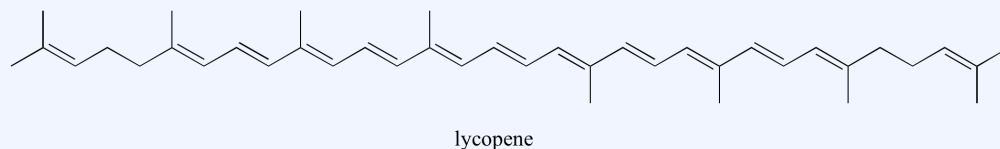
In chapter 4, we will see that MO theory is very useful in explaining why organic molecules that contain extended systems of conjugated pi bonds often have distinctive colors. beta-carotene, the compound responsible for the orange color of carrots, has an extended system of 11 conjugated pi bonds.



Exercise: Identify all conjugated and isolated double bonds in the structures below. For each conjugated pi system, specify the number of overlapping p orbitals, and how many pi electrons are shared among them.



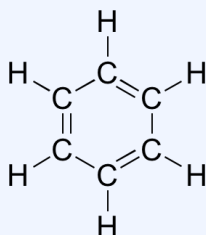
Exercise: Identify all isolated and conjugated pi bonds in lycopene, the red-colored compound in tomatoes. How many pi electrons are contained in the conjugated pi system?



[Solutions to exercises](#)

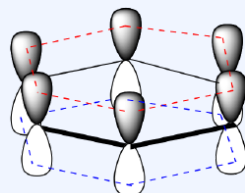
AROMATICITY - THE ULTIMATE CONJUGATED SYSTEM

Molecular orbital theory is especially helpful in explaining the unique properties of **aromatic** compounds such as benzene:



Although benzene is most often drawn with three double bonds and three single bonds, in fact all of the carbon-carbon bonds are exactly the same length (138 pm). In addition, the pi bonds in benzene are significantly less reactive than 'normal' pi bonds, either isolated or conjugated. Something about the structure of benzene makes its pi bonding arrangement especially stable. This 'something' has a name: it is called 'aromaticity'.

What exactly is this 'aromatic' property that makes the pi bonds in benzene so stable? In large part, the answer to this question lies in the fact that benzene is a *cyclic* molecule in which all of the ring atoms are sp^2 -hybridized. This allows the pi electrons to be delocalized in molecular orbitals that extend all the way around the ring, above and below the plane. For this to happen, of course, the ring must be planar – otherwise the p orbitals couldn't overlap properly. Benzene is indeed known to be a flat molecule.



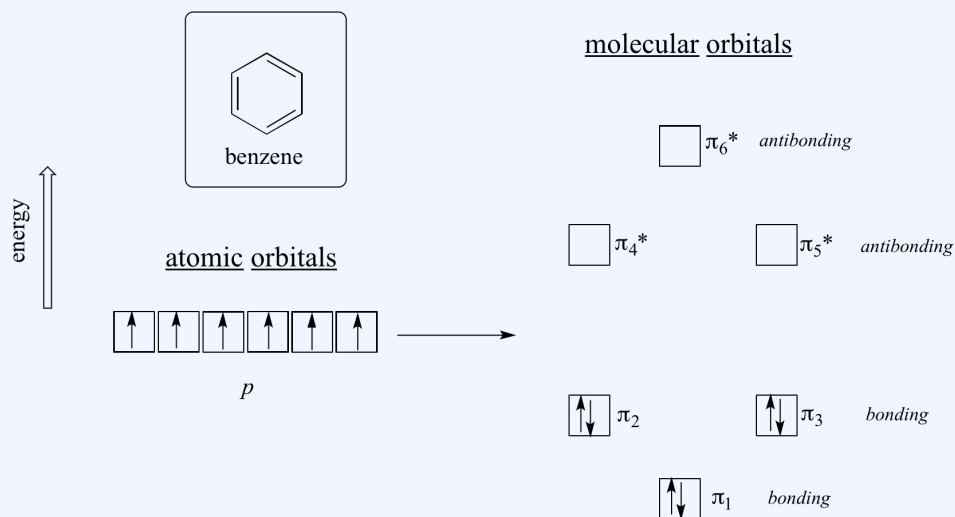
π electrons delocalized around the ring, above and below the plane

Do all cyclic molecules with alternating single and double bonds have this same aromatic stability? The answer, in fact, is 'no'. The eight-membered cyclooctatetraene ring shown below is *not* flat, and its π bonds react like 'normal' alkenes.



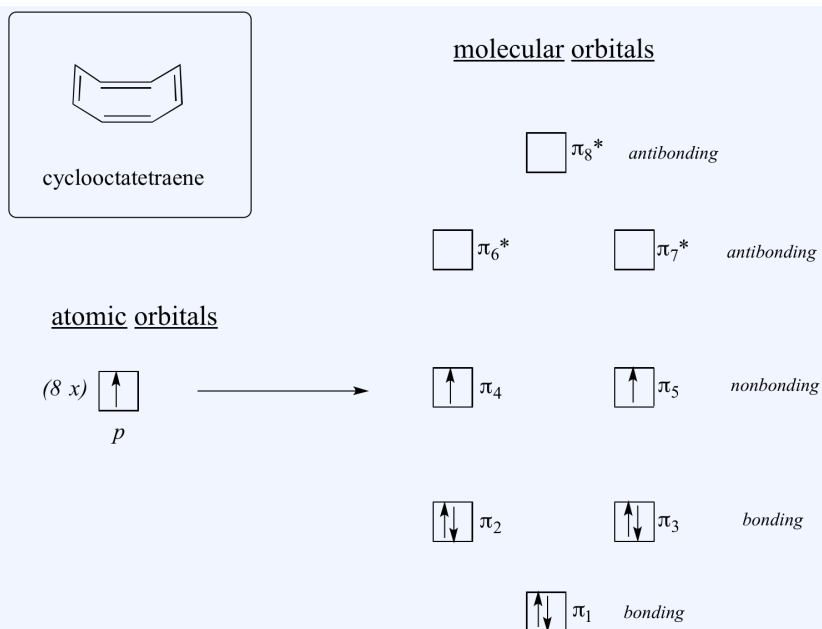
cyclooctatetraene
(not aromatic)

Clearly it takes something more to be aromatic, and this can best be explained with molecular orbital theory. Let's look at an energy diagram of the pi molecular orbitals in benzene.



Quantum mechanical calculations tell us that the six pi molecular orbitals in benzene, formed from six atomic p orbitals, occupy four separate energy levels. π_1 and π_6^* have unique energy levels, while the $\pi_2 - \pi_3$ and $\pi_4^* - \pi_5^*$ pairs are **degenerate**, meaning they are at the same energy level. When we use the *aufbau* principle to fill up these orbitals with the six pi electrons in benzene, we see that the bonding orbitals are completely filled, and the antibonding orbitals are empty. This gives us a good clue to the source of the special stability of benzene: a full set of bonding MO's is similar in many ways to the 'full shell' of electrons in the atomic orbitals of the stable noble gases helium, neon, and argon.

Now, let's do the same thing for cyclooctatetraene, which we have already learned is *not* aromatic.



The result of molecular orbital calculations tells us that the lowest and highest energy MOs (π_1 and π_8^*) have unique energy levels, while the other six form degenerate pairs. Notice that π_4 and π_5 are at the same energy level as the isolated $2p_z$ atomic orbitals: these are therefore neither bonding nor antibonding, rather they are referred to as **nonbonding MOs**. Filling up the MOs with the eight pi electrons in the molecule, we find that the last two electrons are unpaired and fall into the two degenerate nonbonding orbitals. Because we don't have a perfect filled shell of bonding MOs, our molecule is not aromatic. As a consequence, each of the double bonds in cyclooctatetraene acts more like an *isolated* double bond.

For now, the important learning objective is to recognize conjugated pi bonds systems and understand the benzene is exceptionally stable exhibiting a property called aromaticity. Aromaticity and chemistry of aromatic compounds is relatively complex and is discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters of this text.

Organic Chemistry With a Biological Emphasis by Tim Soderberg (University of Minnesota, Morris)