

2.1: Thermodynamic Systems

A thermodynamic system—or just simply a system—is a portion of space with defined boundaries that separate it from its surroundings (see also the title picture of this book). The surroundings may include other thermodynamic systems or physical systems that are not thermodynamic systems. A boundary may be a real physical barrier or a purely notional one. Typical examples of systems are reported in Figure 2.1.1 below.¹



Figure 2.1.1: Examples of Thermodynamic Systems.

In the first case, a liquid is contained in a typical Erlenmeyer flask. The boundaries of the system are the glass walls of the beaker. The second system is represented by the gas contained in a balloon. The boundary is a physical barrier also in this case, being the plastic of the balloon. The third case is that of a thunder cloud. The boundary is not a well-defined physical barrier, but rather some condition of pressure and chemical composition at the interface between the cloud and the atmosphere. Finally, the fourth case is the case of an open flame. In this case, the boundary is again non-physical, and possibly even harder to define than for a cloud. For example, we can choose to define the flame based on some temperature threshold, color criterion, or even some chemical one. Despite the lack of physical boundaries, the cloud and the flame—as portions of space containing matter—can be defined as a thermodynamic system.

A system can exchange exclusively mass, exclusively energy, or both mass and energy with its surroundings. Depending on the boundaries' ability to transfer these quantities, a system is defined as open, closed, or isolated. An open system exchanges both mass and energy. A closed system exchanges only energy, but not mass. Finally, an isolated system does not exchange mass nor energy.

When a system exchanges mass or energy with its surroundings, some of its parameters (variables) change. For example, if a system loses mass to the surroundings, the number of molecules (or moles) in the system will decrease. Similarly, if a system absorbs some energy, one or more of its variables (such as its temperature) increase. Mass and energy can flow into the system or out of the system. Let's consider mass exchange only. If some molecules of a substance leave the system, and then the same amount of molecules flow back into the system, the system will not be modified. We can count, for example, 100 molecules leaving a system and assign them the value of -100 in an outgoing process, and then observe the same 100 molecules going back into the system and assign them a value of $+100$. Regardless of the number of molecules present in the system in the first place, the overall balance will be -100 (from the outgoing process) $+100$ (from the ingoing process) $= 0$, which brings the system to its initial situation (mass has not changed). However, from a mathematical standpoint, we could have equally assigned the label $+100$ to the outgoing process and -100 to the ingoing one, and the overall total would have stayed the same: $+100-100 = 0$. Which of the two labels is best? For this case, it seems natural to define a mass going out of the system as negative (the system is losing it), and a mass going into the system as positive (the system is gaining it), but is it as straightforward for energy?

Table 2.1.1

Type of System	Mass	Energy (either heat or work)
Open	Y	Y
Closed	N	Y

Type of System	Mass	Energy (either heat or work)
Isolated	N	N

Here is another example. Let's consider a system that is composed of your body. When you exercise, you lose mass in the form of water (sweat) and CO₂ (from respiration). This mass loss can be easily measured by stepping on a scale before and after exercise. The number you observe on the scale will go down. Hence you have lost weight. After exercise, you will reintegrate the lost mass by drinking and eating. If you have reinstated the same amount you have lost, your weight will be the same as before the exercise (no weight loss). Nevertheless, which label do you attach to the amounts that you have lost and gained? Let's say that you are running a 5 km race without drinking nor eating, and you measure your weight dropping 2 kg after the race. After the race, you drink 1.5 kg of water and eat a 500 g energy bar. Overall you did not lose any weight, and it would seem reasonable to label the 2 kg that you've lost as negative (−2) and the 1.5 kg of water that you drank and the 500 g bar that you ate as positive (+1.5 +0.5 = +2). But is it the only way? After all, you didn't gain nor lose any weight, so why not calling the 2 kg due to exercise +2 and the 2 that you've ingested as −2? It might seem silly, but mathematically it would not make any difference, the total would still be zero. Now, let's consider energy instead of mass. To run the 5km race, you have spent 500 kcal, which then you reintegrate precisely by eating the energy bar. Which sign would you put in front of the kilocalories that you “burned” during the race? In principle, you've lost them, so if you want to be consistent, you should use a negative sign. But if you think about it, you've put quite an effort to “lose” those kilocalories, so it might not feel bad to assign them a positive sign instead. After all, it's perfectly OK to say, “I've done a 500 kcal run today”, while it might sound quite awkward to say, “I've done a −500 kcal run today.” Our previous exercise with mass demonstrates that it doesn't really matter which sign you put in front of the quantities. As long as you are consistent throughout the process, the signs will cancel out. If you've done a +500 kcal run, you've eaten a bar for −500 kcal, resulting in a total zero loss/gain. Alternatively, if you've done a −500 kcal run, you would have eaten a +500 kcal bar, for a total of again zero loss/gain.

These simple examples demonstrate that the sign that we assign to quantities that flow through a boundary is arbitrary (i.e., we can define it any way we want, as long as we are always consistent with ourselves). There is no best way to assign those signs. If you ask two different people, you might obtain two different answers. But we are scientists, and we must make sure to be rigorous. For this reason, chemists have established a convention for the signs that we will follow throughout this course. If we are consistent in following the convention, we are guaranteed to never make any mistake with the signs.

Definition: System-centric

The chemistry convention of the sign is system-centric:²

- If something (energy or mass) goes into the system it has a positive sign (the system is gaining)
- If something (energy or mass) goes out of the system it has a negative sign (the system is losing)

If you want a trick to remember the convention, use the weight loss/gain during the exercise example above. You are the system, if you lose weight, the kilograms will be negative (−2 kg), while if you gain weight, they will be positive (+2 kg). Similarly, if you eat an energy bar, you are the system, and you will have increased your energy by +500 kcal (positive). In contrast, if you burned energy during exercise, you are the system, and you will have lost energy, hence −500 kcal (negative). If the system is a balloon filled with gas, and the balloon is losing mass, you are the balloon, and you are losing weight; hence the mass will be negative. If the balloon is absorbing heat (likely increasing its temperature and increasing its volume), you are the system, and you are gaining heat; hence heat will be positive.

1. The photos depicted in this figure are taken from [Wikipedia](#): the Erlenmeyer flasks photo was taken by user Maytouch L., and distributed under CC-BY-SA license; the cloud photo was taken by user [Mathew T Rader](#), and distributed under CC-BY-SA license; the flame picture was taken by user [Oscar](#), and distributed under CC-BY-SA license; the balloon photo is in the public domain.
2. Notice that physicists use a different sign convention when it comes to thermodynamics. To eliminate confusion, I will not describe the physics convention here, but if you are reading thermodynamics on a physics textbook, or if you are browsing the web and stumble on thermodynamics formula (e.g., on Wikipedia), please be advised that some quantity, such as work, might have a different sign than the one that is used in this textbook. Obviously, the science will not change, but you need to be

always consistent, so if you decide that you want to use the physics convention, make sure to *always* use the physics convention. In this course, on the other hand, we will *always* use the chemistry one, as introduced above.

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