

4.13: Definitions

Learning Objective

- Learn some terminology involving solutions.
- Recognize which terminology is qualitative and which terminology is quantitative.
- Explain why certain substances dissolve in other substances.

The major component of a solution is called the **solvent**. The minor component of a solution is called the **solute**. "Major" and "minor" indicate which component has the greater or lesser presence by mass or moles, respectively. Sometimes this becomes confusing, especially when considering substances with very different molar masses. We will confine the discussion here to solutions for which the major component and the minor component are obvious.

Solutions exist for every possible phase of the solute and the solvent. Salt water, for example, is a solution of solid NaCl in liquid water; soda water is a solution of gaseous CO₂ in liquid water, while air is a solution of a gaseous solute (O₂) in a gaseous solvent (N₂). In all cases, however, the overall phase of the solution is the same phase as the solvent.

✓ Example 4.13.1: Sugar Water

A solution is made by dissolving 1.00 g of sucrose (C₁₂H₂₂O₁₁) in 100.0 g of liquid water. Identify the solvent and solute in the resulting solution.

Solution

Either by mass or by moles, the obvious minor component is sucrose, so it is the solute. Water—the majority component—is the solvent. The fact that the resulting solution is the same phase as water also suggests that water is the solvent.

? Exercise 4.13.1

A solution is made by dissolving 3.33 g of HCl(g) in 40.0 g of liquid methyl alcohol (CH₃OH). Identify the solvent and solute in the resulting solution.

Answer

solute: HCl(g); solvent: CH₃OH

One important concept of solutions is in defining how much solute is dissolved in a given amount of solvent. This concept is called **concentration**. Various words are used to describe the relative amounts of solute. **Dilute** describes a solution that has very little solute, while **concentrated** describes a solution that has a lot of solute. One problem is that these terms are qualitative; they describe more or less but not exactly how much.

In most cases, only a certain maximum amount of solute can be dissolved in a given amount of solvent. This maximum amount is called the **solubility** of the solute. It is usually expressed in terms of the amount of solute that can dissolve in 100 g of the solvent at a given temperature. Table 4.13.1 lists the solubilities of some simple ionic compounds. These solubilities vary widely: NaCl can dissolve up to 31.6 g per 100 g of H₂O, while AgCl can dissolve only 0.00019 g per 100 g of H₂O.

Table 4.13.1: Solubilities of Some Ionic Compounds

Solute	Solubility (g per 100 g of H ₂ O at 25°C)
AgCl	0.00019
CaCO ₃	0.0006
KBr	70.7
NaCl	36.1
NaNO ₃	94.6

When the maximum amount of solute has been dissolved in a given amount of solvent, we say that the solution is **saturated** with solute. When less than the maximum amount of solute is dissolved in a given amount of solute, the solution is **unsaturated**. These terms are also qualitative terms because each solute has its own solubility. A solution of 0.00019 g of AgCl per 100 g of H₂O may be saturated, but with so little solute dissolved, it is also rather dilute. A solution of 36.1 g of NaCl in 100 g of H₂O is also saturated but rather concentrated. Ideally, we need more precise ways of specifying the amount of solute in a solution. We will introduce such ways in Section 11.3.

In some circumstances, it is possible to dissolve more than the maximum amount of a solute in a solution. Usually, this happens by heating the solvent, dissolving more solute than would normally dissolve at regular temperatures, and letting the solution cool down slowly and carefully. Such solutions are called **supersaturated** solutions and are not stable; given an opportunity (such as dropping a crystal of solute in the solution), the excess solute will precipitate from the solution.

It should be obvious that some solutes dissolve in certain solvents but not others. NaCl, for example, dissolves in water but not in vegetable oil. Beeswax dissolves in liquid hexane but not water. What is it that makes a solute soluble in some solvents but not others?

The answer is intermolecular interactions. The intermolecular interactions include London dispersion forces, dipole-dipole interactions, and hydrogen bonding (as described in Chapter 10). From experimental studies, it has been determined that if molecules of a solute experience the same intermolecular forces that the solvent does, the solute will likely dissolve in that solvent. So, NaCl—a very polar substance because it is composed of ions—dissolves in water, which is very polar, but not in oil, which is generally nonpolar. Nonpolar wax dissolves in nonpolar hexane but not in polar water. This concept leads to the general rule that "like dissolves like" for predicting whether a solute is soluble in a given solvent. However, this is a general rule, not an absolute statement, so it must be applied with care.

✓ Example 4.13.2: Polar and Nonpolar Solvents

Would I₂ be more soluble in CCl₄ or H₂O? Explain your answer.

Solution

I₂ is nonpolar. Of the two solvents, CCl₄ is nonpolar and H₂O is polar, so I₂ would be expected to be more soluble in CCl₄.

? Exercise 4.13.2

Would C₃H₇OH be more soluble in CCl₄ or H₂O? Explain your answer.

Answer

H₂O because both experience hydrogen bonding

Summary

- Solutions are composed of a solvent (major component) and a solute (minor component).
- Concentration is the expression of the amount of solute in a given amount of solvent and can be described by several qualitative terms.
- Solubility is a specific amount of solute that can dissolve in a given amount of solvent.
- "Like dissolves like" is a useful rule for deciding if a solute will be soluble in a solvent.

This page titled [4.13: Definitions](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Anonymous](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- [11.2: Definitions](#) by Anonymous is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#). Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/beginning-chemistry/>.