

2.10: Basic Principles of Green Chemistry

From the preceding discussion, it should be obvious that there are certain basic principles of green chemistry. Some publications recognize “the twelve principles of green chemistry.”² This section addresses the main ones of these.

As anyone who has ever spilled the contents of a food container onto the floor well knows, it is better to not make a mess than to clean it up once made. As applied to green chemistry, this basic rule means that *waste prevention is much better than waste cleanup*. Failure to follow this simple rule has resulted in most of the troublesome hazardous waste sites that are causing problems throughout the world today.

One of the most effective ways to prevent generation of wastes is to make sure that insofar as possible *all materials involved in making a product should be incorporated into the final product*. Therefore, the practice of green chemistry is largely about incorporation of all raw materials into the product, if at all possible. We would not likely favor a food recipe that generated a lot of inedible byproduct. The same idea applies to chemical processes. In that respect, the concept of atom economy discussed in Section 2.6 is a key component of green chemistry.

The use or generation of substances that pose hazards to humans and the environment should be avoided. Such substances include toxic chemicals that may be hazardous to workers. They include substances that are likely to become air or water pollutants and harm the environment or organisms in the environment. Here the connection between green chemistry and environmental chemistry is especially strong.

Chemical products should be as effective as possible for their designated purpose, but with minimum toxicity. The practice of green chemistry is making substantial progress in designing chemicals and new approaches to the use of chemicals such that effectiveness is retained and even enhanced while toxicity is reduced.

Chemical synthesis as well as many manufacturing operations make use of auxiliary substances that are not part of the final product. In chemical synthesis, such a substance consists of solvents in which chemical reactions are carried out. Another example consists of separating agents that enable separation of product from other materials. Since these kinds of materials may end up as wastes or (in the case of some toxic solvents) pose health hazards, *the use of auxiliary substances should be minimized and preferably totally avoided*.

Energy consumption poses economic and environmental costs in virtually all synthesis and manufacturing processes. In a broader sense, the extraction of energy, such as fossil fuels pumped from or dug out of the ground, has significant potential to damage the environment. Therefore, *energy requirements should be minimized*. One way in which this can be done is through the use of processes that occur near ambient conditions, rather than at elevated temperature or pressure. One successful approach to this has been the use of biological processes, which, because of the conditions under which organisms grow, must occur at moderate temperatures and in the absence of toxic substances. Such processes are discussed further in Chapters 13 and 14.

Raw materials extracted from earth are depleting in that there is a finite supply that cannot be replenished after they are used. So, wherever possible, *renewable raw materials should be used instead of depletable feedstocks*. As discussed further in Chapter 14, biomass feedstocks are highly favored in those applications for which they work. For depleting feedstocks, recycling should be practiced to the maximum extent possible.

In the synthesis of an organic compound (see Chapter 6), it is often necessary to modify or protect groups on the organic molecule during the course of the synthesis. This often results in the generation of byproducts not incorporated into the final product, such as occurs when a protecting group is bonded to a specific location on a molecule, then removed when protection of the group is no longer needed. Since these processes generate byproducts that may require disposal, *the use of protecting groups in synthesizing chemicals should be avoided insofar as possible*.

Reagents should be as selective as possible for their specific function. In chemical language, this is sometimes expressed as a preference for selective catalytic reagents over nonselective stoichiometric reagents.

Products that must be dispersed into the environment should be designed to break down rapidly into innocuous products. One of the oldest, but still one of the best, examples of this is the modification of the surfactant in household detergents 15 or 20 years after they were introduced for widespread consumption to yield a product that is biodegradable. The poorly biodegradable surfactant initially used caused severe problems of foaming in wastewater treatment plants and contamination of water supplies. Synthesis of a biodegradable substitute solved the problem.

Exacting “real-time” control of chemical processes is essential for efficient, safe operation with minimum production of wastes. This goal has been made much more attainable by modern computerized controls. However, it requires accurate knowledge of the concentrations of materials in the system measured on a continuous basis. Therefore, *the successful practice of green chemistry requires real-time, in-process monitoring techniques coupled with process control.*

Accidents, such as spills, explosions, and fires, are major hazards in the chemical industry. Not only are these incidents potentially dangerous in their own right, they tend to spread toxic substances into the environment and increase exposure of humans and other organisms to these substances. For this reason, it is best to *avoid the use or generation of substances that are likely to react violently, burn, build up excessive pressures, or otherwise cause unforeseen incidents in the manufacturing process.*

The principles outlined above are developed to a greater degree in the remainder of the book. They should be kept in mind in covering later sections.

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