

## 13

## EMPIRICAL FORMULA DETERMINATION

**Text Reference**  
Section 10.3

**PURPOSE**

To determine the empirical formula of magnesium oxide.

**BACKGROUND**

Carbon dioxide ( $\text{CO}_2$ ), water ( $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ), and ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ) are three out of many chemical compounds that you are familiar with. Have you ever seen a compound with a formula such as  $\text{Na}_{2.3}\text{Cl}_{3.9}$ ? In fact, such a formula is impossible. Only whole atoms, not fractions of atoms, react with each other to form products. Also, although elements may react in different proportions to form more than one compound, the proportions of atoms in those compounds will always be a ratio of small whole numbers.

An empirical formula gives the simplest whole-number ratio of the different atoms in a compound. For example, while the molecular formula for hydrogen peroxide is  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ , the simplest whole-number ratio of hydrogen and oxygen atoms can be expressed as  $\text{HO}$ . Thus, the empirical formula of hydrogen peroxide is  $\text{HO}$ .

In this lab, you will experimentally determine the empirical formula of magnesium oxide, the compound formed when magnesium metal reacts with oxygen.

**MATERIALS (PER PAIR)**

safety goggles	crucible tongs
crucible	gas burner
crucible lid	centigram balance
clay triangle	magnesium ribbon, Mg <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 2px;">F</span>
ring stand	2 pieces of exposed film
ring support	

**SAFETY FIRST!**

In this lab, the crucible you are using will become quite hot and could cause a severe burn if handled improperly. Observe all precautions, especially those listed below. If you see a safety icon beside a step in the Procedure, refer to the list below for its meaning.



**Caution:** Wear your safety goggles. (All steps.)



**Caution:** Do not look directly at burning magnesium. Do not inhale the smoke produced when the magnesium is burned.



(Steps 3, 4.)

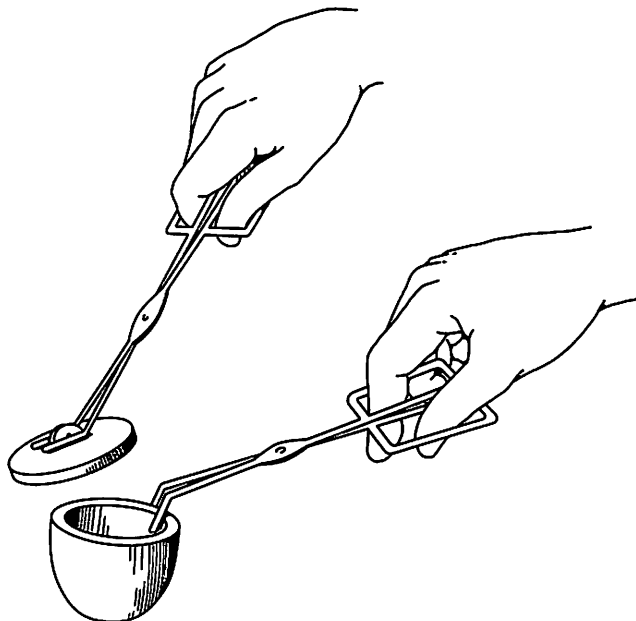


Figure 13.1



**Caution:** Always handle the crucible and crucible lid with crucible tongs, as shown in Figure 13.1. (Steps 3, 4.)



**Note:** Return or dispose of all materials according to the instructions of your teacher. (Step 7.)

## PROCEDURE

As you perform the experiment, record your data in Data Table 1.



1. Set up the equipment, as shown in Figure 13.2. Clean a crucible and its cover with water. Dry them by heating in the hottest part of the flame for 5 minutes. Allow them to cool for at least 10 minutes. Measure and record the combined mass of the crucible and lid to the nearest 0.01 g.



3. **CAUTION:** Do not look directly at the burning magnesium. View the reaction through the pieces of film provided by your teacher. Over a high flame, heat the uncovered crucible on the triangle until the magnesium ignites. **CAUTION:** Do not inhale the smoke produced. When the magnesium begins to burn, immediately cover the crucible (using tongs) and remove the burner.
4. After smoke production has ceased, replace the burner and continue heating the crucible. **CAUTION:** Do not lean over the crucible. Remove the burner and carefully lift the lid and check the reaction every 2 or 3 minutes. After heating for a total of 10 minutes, check to see if the reaction is complete. The magnesium should be wholly converted to a light gray powder, magnesium oxide. If ribbonlike material remains in the crucible, replace the burner and continue heating.

5. Turn off and remove the burner. Allow the crucible to cool completely (at least 10 minutes).
6. Measure and record the combined mass of the crucible, crucible lid, and magnesium oxide.
7. Follow your teacher's instructions for proper disposal of the materials.

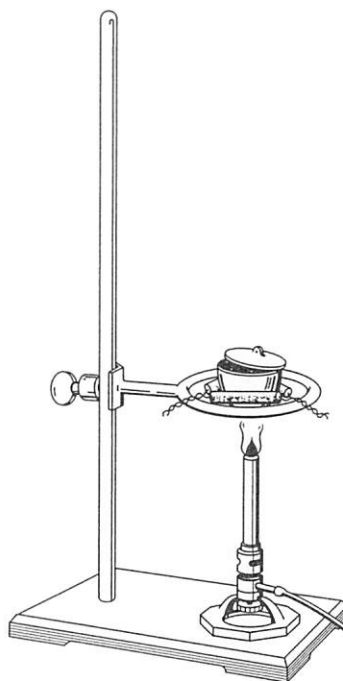


Figure 13.2

## OBSERVATIONS

DATA TABLE 1: MASS MEASUREMENTS	
Item	Mass
empty crucible and lid	
crucible, lid, and Mg (before heating)	
crucible, lid, and combustion product ( $Mg_xO_y$ )	

## ANALYSES AND CONCLUSIONS

1. Determine the mass of magnesium used.
2. Determine the number of moles of magnesium used.  
**Hint:**  $\text{mol Mg} = (\text{mass Mg} / \text{molar mass Mg})$
3. Determine the mass of magnesium oxide formed.
4. Determine the mass of oxygen that combined with the magnesium.
5. Calculate the number of moles of oxygen atoms that were used.
6. Calculate the ratio between moles of magnesium used and moles of oxygen used. Express this ratio in simplest whole-number form.

7. Based on your experimental data, write the empirical formula for magnesium oxide.

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8. Calculate the percent error in your determination of the magnesium:oxygen mole ratio, using the accepted value provided by your teacher.

$$\text{Percent error} = \frac{|\text{accepted value} - \text{experimental value}|}{\text{accepted value}} \times 100 \text{ percent}$$

9. Identify major sources of error in this experiment. Explain how the magnesium:oxygen ratio would be affected by each error you identify.

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10. Is there agreement among the results obtained by others in the class? What does the class data tell you about the empirical formula of a compound?

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11. Interpret, in terms of atoms and in terms of moles, the subscripts in the chemical formula for ethane ( $C_2H_6$ ).

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## GOING FURTHER

### Develop a Hypothesis

At the high temperature at which this reaction takes place, a green-yellow solid may also be formed. Propose a hypothesis about the chemical nature of this product.

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### Design an Experiment

Propose an experiment to test your hypothesis. If resources are available and you have your teacher's permission, perform the experiment.

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