

OXFORD

A GUIDE TO THE

# ELEMENTS

SECOND EDITION

ALBERT STWERTKA



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**OXFORD**

**A Guide to the**  
**ELEMENTS**

**SECOND EDITION**

**ALBERT STWERTKA**

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

**NEW YORK • OXFORD**

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai  
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto

*and an associated company in*

Berlin

Copyright © 1996, 2002 by Albert Stwertka  
Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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permission of Oxford University Press.

Consultant: Robin Eichen Conn, Cargill, Inc.  
Design: Valerie Sauers  
Picture research: Amla Sanghvi, Jennifer Traslavina

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Stwertka, Albert

A guide to the elements / Albert Stwertka. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Chemical elements—Juvenile literature. 2. Periodic law—  
Juvenile literature. [1. Chemical elements.] I. Title.

QD466.S78 2002

546'.8—dc21 98-20372

CIP

AC

ISBN 0-19-515026-0 (lib. ed.); ISBN 0-19-515027-9 (pb. ed.)

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in Hong Kong  
on acid-free paper

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**A**lthough the world is varied and complex, everything in it—air, water, rocks, living tissue, and the almost infinite number of other objects and materials around us—is actually made up of only a limited number of chemical elements. We know today that only 91 such elements exist naturally on the Earth. They range from hydrogen, the lightest element, to uranium, the heaviest. Actually, several more elements do exist, but these have to be made artificially in laboratories.

The basic components of each chemical element are atoms. The atoms of an element consist of three kinds of particles: protons, neutrons, and electrons. Protons and neutrons exist at the core, or nucleus, of the atom. One of the important ways in which these two kinds of particles differ from one another is that each proton carries a single, positive electric charge, whereas a neutron carries no electric charge. Electrons, which are much smaller than either protons or neutrons, each carry a single negative electric charge. Electrons are present at some distance away from the nucleus of the atom and travel rapidly around it in complex paths known as orbits. Under normal circumstances, the number of electrons orbiting around the nucleus of a particular atom is exactly equal to the number of protons in the nucleus of the atom, so that the overall positive electric charge provided by its protons is exactly balanced by the overall negative charge provided by the electrons orbiting its nucleus.

The unique properties of each of the chemical elements are determined by their number of neutrons, protons, and electrons. Besides determining the properties of a pure chemical element, the neutron, proton, and electron content of its atoms also determines its behavior in relation to other chemical elements. Although each element behaves differently and has different properties from all of the others, the atoms of different elements can combine with one another to form clusters of atoms called molecules. It is this combination of atoms that accounts for the enormous variety of chemical substances that can be found in nature and created by modern technology.

When scientists first tried to describe the physical and chemical properties of the elements and chemical compounds, which are formed by the combination of atoms of different elements, they soon became buried under a mountain of seemingly unconnected facts. Many early scientists recognized the need to organize this information, and they attempted to discover some sort of order or pattern that could simplify what seemed to them an overwhelming array of chemical facts. The solution to the

# THE PERIODIC TABLE





nuclear particles that they contribute very little to the weight of an atom. Apparently, listing elements in order of their atomic weights did not always work. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, with the knowledge gained about the structure of the atom, that the correct way of ordering the elements was discovered and the present periodic table was formulated.

## THE NUCLEAR ATOM

The key event that led to the modern understanding of the atom was the discovery that atoms are made up of electrons, protons, and neutrons. Thus, despite its name, which derives from the Greek word for “indivisible,” the atom could indeed be divided into smaller components.

In April 1897, Joseph John Thompson, professor of physics and director of the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge University in England, announced the discovery of the electron. Thompson reported that this tiny particle had a negative electric charge and a mass of about one two-thousandth of that of the lightest atom. Thompson’s momentous discovery of a particle of matter smaller than the atom so startled his colleagues that many thought he had been “pulling their legs.” It was no joke, however, and in Thompson’s own words: “The production of electrons essentially involves the splitting up of the atom, [with] a part of the mass of the atom getting free and becoming detached from the original atom—that part being one or more electrons.”

Ernest Rutherford, the distinguished New Zealand physicist who had been a pupil of Thompson’s and who was a professor of physics at Cambridge University, supplied the next step toward the modern understanding of the atom in 1911. He discovered that the atom had a nucleus and that one of the important particles that occupied the nucleus was the positively charged proton.

As a probe for his study of the atom, Rutherford used the newly discovered phenomenon of radioactivity. Radioactive atoms, like uranium and radium, are unstable, and their nuclei spontaneously disintegrate. One of the products of this disintegration is a massive, positively charged particle called an alpha particle. At the time of its discovery, Rutherford did not know that the alpha particle was the nucleus of a helium atom, consisting of two protons and two neutrons. He therefore used the first letter of the Greek alphabet, *alpha*, to identify this particle and distinguish it from the other products given off by radioactive atoms.

Because the atom was too small to observe directly,

Rutherford's brilliant idea was to use alpha particles as projectiles, firing them at atoms and observing how they scattered. This was like firing bullets at a sealed box and deducing the contents of the box by seeing how the bullets bounced. His target atoms were at first gold atoms contained in very thin sheets of gold foil. Gold was used because it is possible to make gold foil that is very thin, often thinner than fine paper. Rutherford observed that although most of the alpha particles passed right through the target, many were deflected at very large angles. Some were even deflected backward, as if they had hit a stone wall. Rutherford was so astonished by this that he compared it to "firing a 15-inch shell at a piece of tissue paper and having it come back and hit the gunner." Because most of the alpha particles went right through the foil, he reasoned that the atom was mainly empty space but that it must contain a small, heavy, positively charged core that was capable of repelling and scattering the projectiles fired at it. Rutherford called this massive core the nucleus of the atom.

After Rutherford's discovery of the nucleus, it became obvious that the nucleus of hydrogen, the lightest of the atoms, must play a fundamental role in the structure of all atoms. In 1920, he proposed to call this particle the proton, the name by which it has been known ever since.

Finally, in 1932, the British physicist Sir James Chadwick, who also worked at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, discovered that yet another particle existed in the nucleus of atoms. This new particle was the neutron. It has a mass close to the mass of the proton, but it has no electric charge.

These fundamental discoveries, coupled with the work of a brilliant young English physicist named Henry Moseley, ultimately led to the reason for Mendeleev's success with the periodic table. Moseley, just before World War I, had been investigating the X rays given off by various elements. X rays are a very penetrating form of radiation usually produced by accelerating electrons to high speeds and then abruptly stopping them by having them smash into a metal target. The collision causes the target to give off X rays. When different elements are used as targets, the X rays have different properties. Each element has its own set of characteristic X rays. They are almost like a fingerprint of the element. Moseley was able to relate the properties of the X rays to the number of protons contained in the element. He discovered that every element had a different number of protons in the nucleus. The number of protons came to be called the atomic number of the element, represented by the letter  $Z$ , and it was always a whole number.