

# AQA GCSE Chemistry (Combined Science) Unit 9: Chemistry of the Atmosphere

## The Early Atmosphere

Approximately **4.6 billion years ago** the Earth was formed. Scientists have lots of ideas and **theories** about how the atmosphere was produced and the gases within it, but due to the lack of evidence, they cannot be sure.

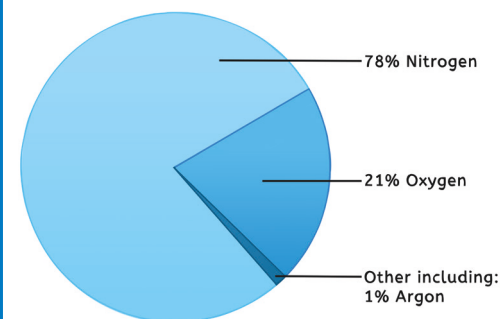
One theory suggested that **intense volcanic activity** released gases that made **Earth's early atmosphere** very similar to that of Mars and Venus. These planet's atmospheres mainly consist of carbon dioxide with little oxygen.

Nitrogen gas would have also been released from volcanoes and would have built up in the atmosphere.

**Water vapour** in Earth's early atmosphere would have **condensed** to create the **seas and oceans**. Carbon dioxide would have dissolved into the water, decreasing the level in the atmosphere.

## Percentage of Gases in the Atmosphere

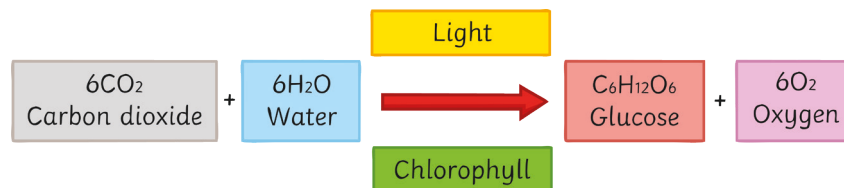
The pie chart below shows the abundance of each gas in our atmosphere.



## How Did the Levels of Oxygen Increase?

2.7 billion years ago, algae first produced oxygen. Gradually over time, the levels of oxygen in our atmosphere increased as plants evolved. This was followed by animals as the levels of oxygen increased to a level that would sustain more complex life.

Oxygen is produced by plants in the process of **photosynthesis**.



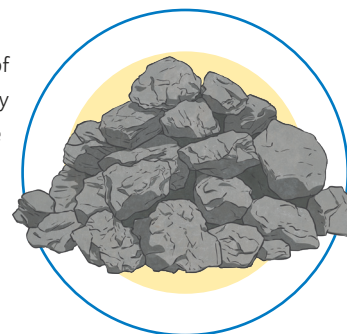
## How Did the Levels of Carbon Dioxide Decrease?

Carbon dioxide **dissolves** in water. As water vapour condensed and the oceans and seas formed, the carbon dioxide gas dissolved producing **carbonate compounds**. This process reduced the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Carbonate compounds were then **precipitated**: limestone is an example of a sedimentary rock; it has the chemical name calcium carbonate.

Plants in the oceans absorbed **carbon dioxide** gas for **photosynthesis**. The organisms from the food chains that the plants supported were turned into fossil fuels. **Fossil fuels** are **non-renewable** and consist of **coal, crude oil, and gas**, all of which contain carbon.

Crude oil was formed millions of years ago. When aquatic plants and animals died, they fell to the bottom of the sea and got trapped under layers of sand and mud. Over time, the organisms got buried deeper below the surface. The **heat and pressure** rose, turning the remains of the organisms into crude oil or natural gas. Oxidation did not occur due to the lack of oxygen.

**Coal** is a fossil fuel formed from **giant plants** that lived hundreds of millions of years ago in swamp-like forests. When these plants died, they sank to the bottom of the swamp where dirt and water began to pile on top of them. Over time, pressure and heat increased and the plant remains underwent chemical and physical changes. The oxygen was pushed out and all that remained was coal.



## The Human Impact and the Greenhouse Effect

Scientists believe that human activities have resulted in the **increased** amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Activities such as **farming cattle** and **farming rice** release huge amounts of **methane** into the atmosphere.

Burning **fossil fuels** in cars and power stations releases large amounts of **carbon dioxide**. With large areas of the rainforest being cut down through **deforestation**, the excess carbon dioxide is not being absorbed by photosynthesis.

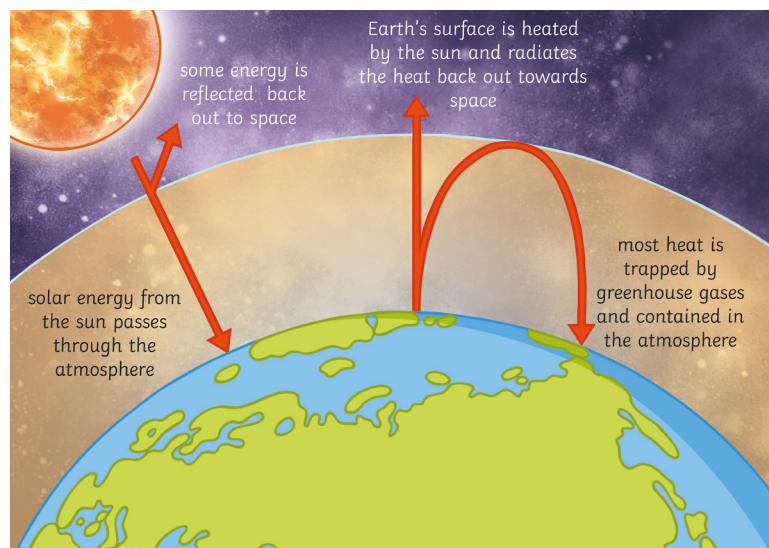
However, not everyone believes that humans are causing the rise in greenhouse gases. Some believe that the rise in global temperatures is associated with cycles of climate change and natural factors.

**Climate science** is often complicated as there are **difficulties** associated with **predicting future global temperatures**. The media present information that can be biased, inaccurate or lacks substantial evidence.

After reading an article on global warming, consider the trustworthiness of the source by considering these factors:

- Is the research done by an expert in that field and do they have the right skills and qualifications to report on the issue?
- Which organisation is reporting the evidence? If it is a newspaper, some stories are sensationalised in order to sell papers.
- Was the research funded by a legitimate organisation and was it conducted in a non-biased way? Think about the methods that were used to obtain the data and the impact the collection and analysis of this data had on the overall result.

## The Greenhouse Effect



A greenhouse is a house made of glass and is commonly used by gardeners to help grow plants and keep them warm. As the sun shines through the greenhouse, the air is heated up and becomes trapped by the glass and is prevented from escaping. During daylight, a greenhouse stays quite warm and this lasts into the night.

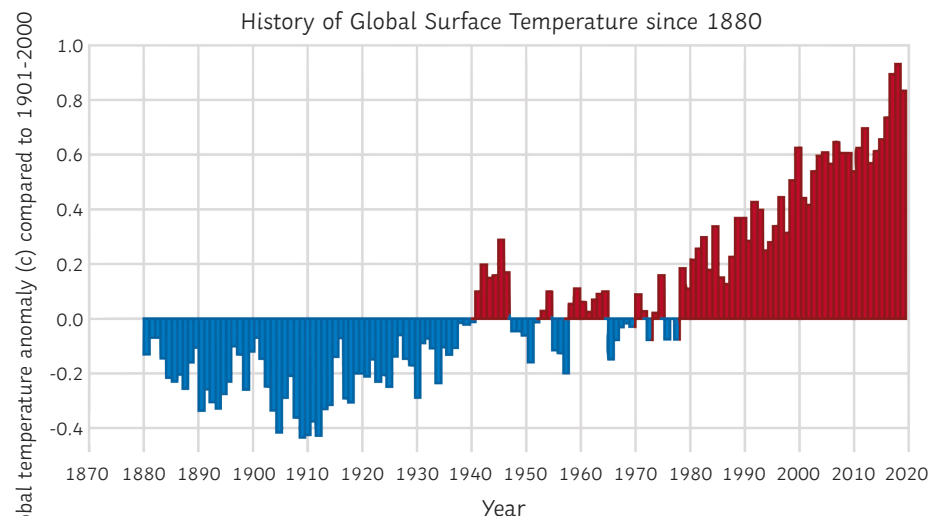
The earth and its atmosphere are very similar to that of a greenhouse. The greenhouse gases in the atmosphere trap the heat and keep the earth warm. The main greenhouse gases are **carbon dioxide**, **water vapour** and **methane**. During the daylight, the sun warms up the earth's surface. During the night, as the earth begins to cool and release the heat back into the atmosphere, some of the heat is trapped by the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

If the **greenhouse effect** becomes too **strong**, the earth will get too warm and melt the Arctic ice. As we burn more fossil fuels, the levels of **carbon dioxide** and the other greenhouse gases **increase** in our atmosphere which makes the greenhouse effect stronger.

## What is the Difference Between Climate Change and Global Warming?

Since the Earth was formed over 4.6 billion years ago, its climate has constantly been changing with several ice ages followed by warmer temperatures. Changes in the Sun's energy reaching the Earth and volcanic eruptions were responsible for the changes until about 200 years ago.

Global warming is different to climate change and is used to explain how the earth's climate has warmed up over the past 200 years. Scientists believe that the warming of the climate is due to the activities of humans.



## Carbon Footprint

The carbon footprint is the total amount of **carbon dioxide** and other greenhouse gases emitted over the full life cycle of a product, service or event.

An individual's carbon footprint is a calculation of all the activities that that person has taken part in throughout the year.

These activities might involve flying abroad or **travelling** by bus or rail. Each of which might be powered by petrol or diesel. **Heating a home** in winter by using a gas-powered boiler and using electricity to power lights and electronic devices.

**Food** also has a **carbon footprint**, for example, beef and rice produces huge amounts of methane when farmed.



## Nitrogen

Nitrogen and oxygen react together to make oxides of nitrogen. This occurs inside a **car engine** where there is a high temperature and pressure. Many compounds can be formed when nitrogen reacts with oxygen. The two that are formed inside a car engine are NO and NO<sub>2</sub>.

Nitrogen compounds are grouped together with the general formula NO<sub>x</sub>. Nitrogen compounds, along with sulfur dioxide, are also responsible for acid rain.

Compounds of nitrogen oxides react in the atmosphere with ultraviolet light from the sun to produce **photochemical smog**. The smog is most noticeable during the morning and afternoon and occurs mainly in densely populated cities.

The presence of smog can have a **major impact on human health**, particularly to those who suffer with **asthma**.

## Combustion

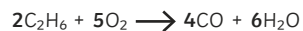
**Complete combustion** occurs when there is **enough oxygen** for a fuel to burn. A hydrocarbon will react with oxygen to produce carbon dioxide and water.

propane + oxygen  $\rightarrow$  carbon dioxide + water



**Incomplete combustion** occurs when there **isn't enough oxygen** for a fuel to burn. The products in this reaction are water and poisonous **carbon monoxide**. Carbon particles (soot) may also be seen.

ethane + oxygen  $\rightarrow$  carbon monoxide + water



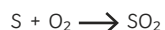
**Carbon monoxide** is a poisonous gas. It is often called the **silent killer** due to it being colourless and odourless. Carbon monoxide works by binding to the **haemoglobin** in your red blood cells. This prevents them from carrying oxygen to the cells around your body. Carbon monoxide detectors are used to detect levels of the gas in the surrounding air and are often placed near gas-powered boilers to detect gas leaks.

**Particulate carbon** irritates the lining of the lungs making asthma worse and could cause cancer. **Global dimming** is caused by particulates of carbon blocking out the Sun's rays and may reduce rainfall.

## Sulfur Dioxide

Sulfur dioxide is an **atmospheric pollutant**. It is a gas that is produced from the burning of **fossil fuels**. Sulfur dioxide is able to dissolve in rainwater and produces **acid rain**. Acid rain causes damage to forests, kills plants and animals that live in aquatic environments, and damages buildings and statues as the acid rain erodes the stone that they are made from.

sulfur + oxygen  $\rightarrow$  sulfur dioxide



Sulfur dioxide can be further oxidised to form sulfur trioxide.

## What is the Link Between Carbon Dioxide and Global Warming?

There is a strong correlation between the percentage concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and increased global temperatures.

The impact of this is that the polar ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising and habitats and rainfall patterns are changing. The impact of which is already being felt around the globe. The consequences of human activity will affect us all.

