

# ABIO Photosynthesis

## Photosynthesis in a Plant Mesophyll Cell: Components and Simulation

Photosynthesis is the process by which plants convert light energy, carbon dioxide ( $\text{CO}_2$ ), and water ( $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ) into chemical energy stored in sugars, releasing oxygen ( $\text{O}_2$ ) as a byproduct. This process takes place in the **mesophyll cells** of leaves, which are densely packed with **chloroplasts** – the specialized organelles where photosynthesis occurs. Below, we describe the key components involved across different biological scales (molecules, organelles, cell type), followed by a set of Python-style pseudocode functions that model a single plant cell and simulate the photosynthetic process (light reactions and Calvin cycle), as well as related measurements and environmental actions.

### Key Biological Components of Photosynthesis

**Mesophyll Cell (Leaf Photosynthetic Cell):** In plants, photosynthesis primarily occurs in mesophyll cells, the middle layer of leaf tissue. These cells are packed with chloroplasts to maximize light capture. Mesophyll cells also contain other organelles (like mitochondria and peroxisomes) that support metabolism. They receive  $\text{CO}_2$  from the air through stomata (leaf pores) and water via the xylem, and they export sugars through the phloem vascular tissue.

### Organelles Involved:

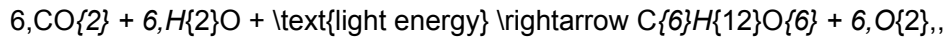
- **Chloroplasts:** Chloroplasts are the sites of photosynthesis inside mesophyll cells. Each chloroplast has an outer and inner membrane, and inside is a network of **thylakoid membranes** arranged in stacks called *grana*. The thylakoid membranes contain **chlorophyll** pigments and proteins that carry out the light-dependent reactions of photosynthesis. The fluid surrounding the thylakoids is the **stroma**, where the Calvin cycle (light-independent reactions) occurs. In the light reactions, chlorophyll absorbs sunlight and drives electron transport that splits water to release  $\text{O}_2$ , pumps protons to produce **ATP** (adenosine triphosphate), and loads electrons onto **NADP<sup>+</sup>** to form **NADPH**. These ATP and NADPH molecules (energy carriers) are then used in the stroma to fix  $\text{CO}_2$  into sugars via the Calvin cycle.
- **Mitochondria:** Mitochondria are the organelles responsible for **cellular respiration** – the process of breaking down sugars with  $\text{O}_2$  to generate ATP for the cell's energy needs. In a photosynthetic cell, mitochondria use the  $\text{O}_2$  and glucose (or other sugars) produced by photosynthesis to carry out aerobic respiration, which releases  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  as byproducts. Thus, photosynthesis and respiration are complementary: photosynthesis stores energy in glucose and releases  $\text{O}_2$ , while respiration releases energy (ATP) from glucose and consumes  $\text{O}_2$ . Mitochondria in mesophyll cells also interact with chloroplasts in metabolic exchanges; for example, at night or under high demand, sugars made in chloroplasts may be broken down in mitochondria to maintain the cell's metabolism.
- **Peroxisomes:** Peroxisomes are small organelles containing enzymes that catalyze reactions to neutralize harmful byproducts (like hydrogen peroxide) and to participate in certain metabolic pathways. In photosynthetic cells, peroxisomes play a crucial role in **photorespiration**. Photorespiration occurs

when the enzyme RuBisCO in the Calvin cycle uses  $O_2$  instead of  $CO_2$  (a side reaction that happens especially under high  $O_2$ /low  $CO_2$  conditions), leading to a toxic two-carbon compound (phosphoglycolate). Peroxisomes help convert this compound into glycolate and then into glycine, which is sent to mitochondria for further processing. Through this chloroplast-peroxisome-mitochondria metabolic exchange, peroxisomes salvage some of the carbon and detoxify peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ) generated in the process. While photorespiration drains some energy (using ATP and NADPH) and releases  $CO_2$ , it is an important pathway that involves all three organelles working together.

### Key Biomolecules:

- **Water ( $H_2O$ ):** Water is an essential substrate for the light reactions. Chloroplasts use water as the source of electrons; water molecules are split (oxidized) by Photosystem II, releasing electrons to replace those lost by excited chlorophyll. This splitting produces protons ( $H^+$ , contributing to the proton gradient for ATP synthesis) and liberates  $O_2$  gas as a **byproduct**.
- **Carbon Dioxide ( $CO_2$ ):**  $CO_2$  is the carbon source for building sugars. In the Calvin cycle (light-independent reactions) within the chloroplast stroma, the enzyme **RuBisCO** fixes  $CO_2$  by attaching it to a 5-carbon sugar (RuBP), eventually leading to the formation of 3-carbon sugars (glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate, GA3P) which are later used to synthesize glucose and other carbohydrates. For every molecule of  $CO_2$  fixed, energy from ATP and NADPH is consumed (in  $C_3$  plants, fixing one  $CO_2$  requires 3 ATP and 2 NADPH).
- **Oxygen ( $O_2$ ):**  $O_2$  is produced during the light-dependent reactions when water is split. Oxygen is essentially a **waste product** of photosynthesis, diffusing out of the chloroplast and ultimately out of the leaf via stomata. This  $O_2$ , however, is vital for the environment as it replenishes atmospheric oxygen and is used by plants (and other organisms) in respiration. Within the cell,  $O_2$  can be used by mitochondria for aerobic respiration. High internal  $O_2$  can also trigger photorespiration via RuBisCO, as mentioned above.
- **ATP (Adenosine Triphosphate):** ATP is the primary energy currency of the cell. In photosynthesis, ATP is produced in the chloroplast's light reactions by **photophosphorylation** as protons flow through ATP synthase in the thylakoid membrane. The energy from light is thus stored in ATP. The Calvin cycle then uses ATP, converting it to ADP (adenosine diphosphate) and inorganic phosphate (Pi), to drive the endergonic reactions that build sugar molecules. (Similarly, in mitochondria, ATP is produced by oxidative phosphorylation using energy from glucose breakdown, highlighting the interplay between the two organelles.)
- **NADPH (Nicotinamide Adenine Dinucleotide Phosphate, reduced form):** NADPH is an electron carrier (a form of chemical reducing power). In the light reactions, the energized electrons from the chlorophyll/ETC are ultimately transferred to  $NADP^+$  to form NADPH. NADPH carries high-energy electrons and hydrogen, and it is consumed in the Calvin cycle to reduce 3-carbon intermediates into G3P (glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate) and eventually glucose. When NADPH is used, it is oxidized back to  $NADP^+$ , which returns to the thylakoids to be reused in light reactions.

- **Glucose (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>12</sub>O<sub>6</sub>) and Sugars:** The end-product of the Calvin cycle is not directly glucose but a 3-carbon sugar (GA3P). Two GA3P can be combined (often in the cytosol) to form glucose or fructose, and plants often convert these to **sucrose** (for transport) or **starch** (for storage). The general overall equation for photosynthesis can be summarized as:



meaning six CO<sub>2</sub> and six H<sub>2</sub>O produce one glucose (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>12</sub>O<sub>6</sub>) and six O<sub>2</sub>. Glucose is a high-energy molecule that can be used by the plant cell for building cellulose and other compounds, or broken down in mitochondria for energy. In photosynthetic cells, much of the GA3P is converted to sucrose (a transportable sugar) and sent via phloem to feed non-photosynthetic parts of the plant.

## Overview of Photosynthetic Stages

Photosynthesis consists of two main stages: the **light-dependent reactions** and the **light-independent reactions** (Calvin cycle). These stages are tightly linked: the light reactions capture solar energy to produce ATP and NADPH, and the Calvin cycle uses those molecules to fix carbon into sugars. Below is a stepwise summary:

1. **Light-Dependent Reactions (Thylakoid Membranes):** When sunlight hits the chloroplast, pigments like chlorophyll absorb photons. This energy excites electrons, which travel through the **electron transport chain** (ETC) in the thylakoid membrane. As the electrons move through carriers (between Photosystem II and Photosystem I), H<sup>+</sup> ions are pumped into the thylakoid lumen, creating a proton gradient. Electrons removed from chlorophyll are replaced by splitting water: for each H<sub>2</sub>O split, O<sub>2</sub>, H<sup>+</sup>, and electrons are produced. O<sub>2</sub> is released as a gas. The proton gradient drives ATP synthesis (ADP + Pi → ATP) via ATP synthase. Meanwhile, the electrons eventually reduce NADP<sup>+</sup> to NADPH at the end of the ETC. The net result: **light energy is converted to chemical energy** in the form of **ATP** and **NADPH**, and **oxygen gas is produced** and expelled. These reactions occur only in light (during daytime) and are confined to the chloroplast's thylakoids.
2. **Calvin Cycle (Light-Independent Reactions, Stroma):** The ATP and NADPH generated from the light reactions are next used in the stroma to drive the Calvin cycle. This cycle does not require light directly, but it depends on the energy carriers from the light stage, so it typically runs during daylight when ATP/NADPH supply is available. The cycle begins with **carbon fixation**: the enzyme **RuBisCO** attaches CO<sub>2</sub> to ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate (RuBP), forming 3-phosphoglycerate molecules. Through a series of enzymatic steps, and using energy from **ATP** and electrons from **NADPH**, these intermediates are reduced to glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate (GA3P). For every 3 CO<sub>2</sub> molecules fixed, one GA3P is produced (and 5 molecules of RuBP are regenerated). Two GA3P can later combine to form glucose or other sugars. The Calvin cycle consumes the ATP and NADPH, converting them back to ADP, Pi, and NADP<sup>+</sup>, which are returned to the thylakoids to be recharged by the light reactions. Thus, the two stages work in a **cycle**: light reactions provide the energy, the Calvin cycle builds the sugar, and the spent energy carriers go back to be reused. The end-products include energy-rich sugars like glucose (which can be polymerized into starch or converted to sucrose) and other organic molecules.

## Photorespiration Note (Interactions with Peroxisomes and Mitochondria)

Not all carbon fixation is perfectly efficient. When  $O_2$  levels are high inside the leaf (or  $CO_2$  is low), RuBisCO may incorporate  $O_2$  instead of  $CO_2$  in a process called **photorespiration**. This yields one molecule of 3-phosphoglycerate (usable in the Calvin cycle) and one molecule of 2-phosphoglycolate, a compound that cannot directly re-enter the cycle. Photorespiration is considered a wasteful side-reaction because it releases previously fixed  $CO_2$  and consumes ATP and NADPH without producing sugar. However, plants have a recovery pathway: the 2-phosphoglycolate is transported from the chloroplast to the **peroxisome**, where it is converted to glycolate and then to glyoxylate, producing  $H_2O_2$  that peroxisomal **catalase** breaks down. The glyoxylate is converted to the amino acid glycine, which is sent to the **mitochondrion**. In mitochondria, two glycine molecules are converted to serine (via the Glycine Decarboxylase Complex), releasing  $CO_2$  and  $NH_3$ . The serine returns to the peroxisome, is converted to glycerate, which goes back to the chloroplast and is phosphorylated to re-enter the Calvin cycle as 3-phosphoglycerate. This **photorespiratory cycle** spans three organelles (chloroplast, peroxisome, mitochondrion) and helps the plant recover some of the carbon, though at an energetic cost. It illustrates how the **chloroplast, mitochondria, and peroxisomes** cooperate metabolically in a mesophyll cell.

With the biological process outlined, we can now model a single mesophyll cell and simulate these processes in a programmatic way. Below are Python-style function definitions that create a representation of the cell and simulate key aspects of photosynthesis. This model is highly simplified and conceptual, but it captures the roles of organelles and molecules discussed above.

### Python-Style Simulation Functions

The following pseudocode defines a simple data structure for a plant cell and functions to simulate photosynthesis and related actions. The cell is represented as a Python dictionary (JSON-like structure) containing the cell type, organelles, molecule concentrations, and environmental parameters. Functions are provided to generate the cell, simulate the light reactions and Calvin cycle, measure molecule levels, and adjust external conditions (light,  $CO_2$ , temperature). Comments within the code indicate the biological meaning of each part of the simulation:

```
def create_mesophyll_cell():
    """Initialize a mesophyll cell with organelles and baseline molecule levels."""
    cell = {
        "cell_type": "Mesophyll cell",
        "organelles": {
            "chloroplasts": 20,          # number of chloroplasts (approximate)
            "mitochondria": 10,          # number of mitochondria
            "peroxisomes": 5             # number of peroxisomes
        },
        "molecules": {
            # Concentrations or relative quantities inside the cell:
            "CO2": 0.04,                 # CO2 level (e.g. 0.04% ~ ambient 400 ppm in air)
            "O2": 0.21,                 # O2 level (~21% in air; in cell can rise from
photosynthesis)
            "H2O": 1.0,                 # H2O (arbitrary units, assume ample water)
```

```

        "ATP": 0.0,      # ATP (energy currency, starts low in dark)
        "ADP": 1.0,     # ADP (higher in dark, will be converted to ATP in
light)
        "NADPH": 0.0,   # NADPH (reduced carrier, starts at 0 in dark)
        "NADP+": 1.0,   # NADP+ (oxidized form, available to be reduced)
        "glucose": 0.0  # Glucose produced (stored sugar quantity)
    },
    "environment": {
        "light_intensity": 0.0, # no light initially (dark conditions)
        "external_CO2": 400.0,  # external CO2 ppm (e.g., 400 ppm ambient)
        "temperature": 25.0     # temperature in °C
    }
}
return cell

```

```

def simulate_light_reactions(cell, light_intensity, duration=1.0):
    """Simulate the light-dependent reactions for a given duration (in arbitrary
units).
    Increases ATP and NADPH, consumes H2O, and produces O2."""
    # Calculate how much ATP/NADPH to produce based on light intensity and duration
    # (In this simple model, assume linear relation for demonstration)
    atp_produced = 5.0 * light_intensity * duration    # amount of ATP generated
    nadph_produced = 3.0 * light_intensity * duration  # amount of NADPH generated
    water_used = 1.0 * light_intensity * duration      # water molecules split
    oxygen_produced = 0.5 * light_intensity * duration # O2 molecules released

    # Update cell's molecule levels
    cell["molecules"]["H2O"] = max(0.0, cell["molecules"]["H2O"] - water_used)
    cell["molecules"]["O2"] += oxygen_produced
    cell["molecules"]["ATP"] += atp_produced
    cell["molecules"]["ADP"] = max(0.0, cell["molecules"]["ADP"] - atp_produced) #
ADP converted to ATP
    cell["molecules"]["NADPH"] += nadph_produced
    cell["molecules"]["NADP+"] = max(0.0, cell["molecules"]["NADP+"] -
nadph_produced) # NADP+ converted to NADPH

    # Light reactions occur in chloroplast thylakoids: use H2O, produce O2, ATP,
NADPH [oai_citation_attribution:48#bio.libretexts.org]
    (https://bio.libretexts.org/Courses/University\_of\_Pittsburgh/Environmental\_Science\_\(Whittinghill\)/05%3A\_Cycling\_of\_Matter\_in\_the\_Earth\_System/5.04%3A\_Photosynthesis#:~:text=Image%3A%20This%20illustration%20shows%20a,takes%20place%20in%20two%20stages
)
    return cell

```

```

def simulate_calvin_cycle(cell, cycles=1):
    """Simulate the Calvin cycle (carbon fixation and sugar production) for a
    number of cycles.

    Each cycle fixes CO2 into organic molecules using ATP and NADPH, producing
    glucose."""
    for _ in range(cycles):
        # Check that there is CO2 available (both internally and from environment
        via stomata)
        if cell["molecules"]["CO2"] <= 0:
            # If internal CO2 is depleted, try to take in more from external
            (stomata diffusion)
            if cell["environment"]["external_CO2"] > 0:
                cell["molecules"]["CO2"] += 0.01 # intake a small amount from
                external CO2
            else:
                break # no CO2 available, stop the cycle

        # Assume one "turn" of the Calvin cycle fixes 1 CO2 (for simplicity, though
        actual cycle fixes 3 per turn)
        if cell["molecules"]["ATP"] >= 3 and cell["molecules"]["NADPH"] >= 2:
            # Consume energy (ATP, NADPH) to fix CO2 into sugar
            [oai_citation_attribution:49#ncbi.nlm.nih.gov]
            (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK26819/#:~:text=In%20the%20carbon,molecules%2
            0and%20energy%20for%20growth)
            cell["molecules"]["CO2"] -= 1.0 # use 1 CO2
            cell["molecules"]["ATP"] -= 3.0 # use 3 ATP per CO2 fixed
            [oai_citation_attribution:50#ncbi.nlm.nih.gov]
            (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK26819/#:~:text=Three%20Molecules%20of%20ATP%
            20and,2%7D%20Molecule%20That%20Is%20Fixed)
            cell["molecules"]["ADP"] += 3.0 # ATP -> ADP
            cell["molecules"]["NADPH"] -= 2.0 # use 2 NADPH per CO2 fixed
            [oai_citation_attribution:51#ncbi.nlm.nih.gov]
            (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK26819/#:~:text=Three%20Molecules%20of%20ATP%
            20and,2%7D%20Molecule%20That%20Is%20Fixed)
            cell["molecules"]["NADP+"] += 2.0 # NADPH -> NADP+
            # Produce glucose (or increment stored sugar by an equivalent of one
            CO2 fixed)
            cell["molecules"]["glucose"] += 0.167 # 1 CO2 fixed is 1/6 of a glucose
            (since C6H12O6 needs 6 CO2)
        else:
            # Not enough ATP/NADPH to run Calvin cycle
            break

    # Calvin cycle occurs in chloroplast stroma: fixes CO2 into carbohydrates
    [oai_citation_attribution:52#bio.libretexts.org]
    (https://bio.libretexts.org/Courses/University_of_Pittsburgh/Environmental_Science_
    (Whittinghill)/05%3A_Cycling_of_Matter_in_the_Earth_System/5.04%3A_Photosynthesis#:

```



**How the simulation works:** First, we generate a cell using `create_mesophyll_cell()`. This gives us a mesophyll cell with a starting state (no light, baseline  $\text{CO}_2$ , etc.). To simulate photosynthesis, we can **apply light** to the cell which triggers the light reactions. For example, calling `apply_light(cell, intensity=1.0, duration=1.0)` will increase the cell's ATP and NADPH and produce  $\text{O}_2$  (while consuming  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ) according to the `simulate_light_reactions` function. Next, we can call `simulate_calvin_cycle(cell, cycles=n)` to simulate  $n$  iterations of the Calvin cycle, which will consume the ATP, NADPH, and  $\text{CO}_2$  to produce glucose. The `measure_concentrations(cell)` function can be used at any point to retrieve the current levels of molecules ( $\text{CO}_2$ ,  $\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , ATP, NADPH, glucose, etc.) in the cell. Additionally, we can adjust environmental conditions: `adjust_CO2(cell, level)` could simulate opening stomata to a new external  $\text{CO}_2$  concentration, and `change_temperature(cell, temp)` could be used to model temperature effects on the process (though in this simple model we just record the change).

Using this model, one could simulate a scenario step-by-step. For instance, starting in the dark (no ATP/NADPH), then **adding light** will charge the system (increasing ATP/NADPH levels), and then running the Calvin cycle will convert  $\text{CO}_2$  into glucose until the ATP and NADPH are used up. Repeating these steps cyclically emulates how a real plant cell operates in daylight: light-dependent reactions and carbon fixation happen in tandem, regulated by available light,  $\text{CO}_2$ , and temperature. The model also qualitatively captures the interplay with respiration: if glucose accumulates, one could imagine the mitochondria consuming it at night (though that is outside the scope of this simple simulation). Similarly, if  $\text{O}_2$  builds up too high relative to  $\text{CO}_2$ , a more advanced model might trigger photorespiration pathways (involving peroxisomes and mitochondria) to illustrate the efficiency loss, but our simple functions focus on the core photosynthetic process.

**Summary:** This structured approach links the biology of photosynthesis with a computational representation. We defined the components at molecular, organelle, and cellular levels and then provided functions to simulate light absorption, electron transport (ATP/NADPH production), carbon fixation (sugar production), and environmental influences. This highlights how complex biological processes like photosynthesis can be formalized and explored through a programming model, integrating knowledge across scales from molecules (ATP, NADPH,  $\text{CO}_2$ , etc.) to organelles (chloroplasts, mitochondria, peroxisomes) within a single mesophyll cell.

**Sources:** The biological details and parameters used above are based on well-established plant physiology and biochemistry: water splitting and oxygen evolution in chloroplast thylakoids, ATP and NADPH generation,  $\text{CO}_2$  fixation in the Calvin cycle with energy requirements per  $\text{CO}_2$  fixed, and the overall equation of photosynthesis. The role of organelles such as chloroplasts, mitochondria, and peroxisomes are described in standard references. This integration ensures the simulation functions are grounded in real biological principles of photosynthesis.