

# Describing Chemical Reactions

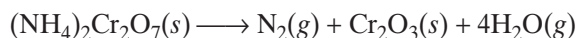
## SECTION 1

### OBJECTIVES

- List three observations that suggest that a chemical reaction has taken place.
- List three requirements for a correctly written chemical equation.
- Write a word equation and a formula equation for a given chemical reaction.
- Balance a formula equation by inspection.

A *chemical reaction* is the process by which one or more substances are changed into one or more different substances. In any chemical reaction, the original substances are known as the *reactants* and the resulting substances are known as the *products*. According to the law of conservation of mass, the total mass of reactants must equal the total mass of products for any given chemical reaction.

Chemical reactions are described by chemical equations. A **chemical equation** represents, with symbols and formulas, the identities and relative molecular or molar amounts of the reactants and products in a chemical reaction. For example, the following chemical equation shows that the reactant ammonium dichromate yields the products nitrogen, chromium(III) oxide, and water.



This strongly exothermic reaction is shown in **Figure 1**.

## Indications of a Chemical Reaction

To know for certain that a chemical reaction has taken place requires evidence that one or more substances have undergone a change in identity. Absolute proof of such a change can be provided only by chemical analysis of the products. However, certain easily observed changes usually indicate that a chemical reaction has occurred.

1. *Evolution of energy as heat and light.* A change in matter that releases energy as both heat and light is strong evidence that a chemical reaction has taken place. For example, you can see in **Figure 1** that the decomposition of ammonium dichromate is accompanied by the evolution of energy as heat and light. And you can see evidence that a chemical reaction occurs between natural gas and oxygen if you burn gas for cooking in your house. Some reactions involve only heat or only light. But heat or light by itself is not necessarily a sign of chemical change, because many physical changes also involve either heat or light.



**FIGURE 1** The decomposition of ammonium dichromate proceeds rapidly, releasing energy in the form of light and heat.