carbon dioxide and water," or simply, "methane and oxygen yield carbon dioxide and water."

The next step in writing a correct chemical equation is to replace the names of the reactants and products with appropriate symbols and formulas. Methane is a molecular compound composed of one carbon atom and four hydrogen atoms. Its chemical formula is CH_4. Recall that oxygen exists in nature as diatomic molecules; it is therefore represented as O_2. The correct formulas for carbon dioxide and water are CO_2 and H_2O, respectively.

A **formula equation** *represents the reactants and products of a chemical reaction by their symbols or formulas.* The formula equation for the reaction of methane and oxygen is written as follows.

$$CH_4(g) + O_2(g) \longrightarrow CO_2(g) + H_2O(g) \quad \text{(not balanced)}$$
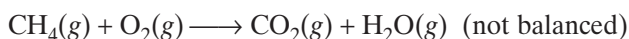
The *g* in parentheses after each formula indicates that the corresponding substance is in the gaseous state. Like a word equation, a formula equation is a qualitative statement. It gives no information about the amounts of reactants or products.
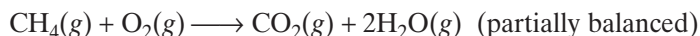
A formula equation meets two of the three requirements for a correct chemical equation. It represents the facts and shows the correct symbols and formulas for the reactants and products. To complete the process of writing a correct equation, the law of conservation of mass must be taken into account. The relative amounts of reactants and products represented in the equation must be adjusted so that the numbers and types of atoms are the same on both sides of the equation. This process is called *balancing an equation* and is carried out by inserting coefficients. Once it is balanced, a formula equation is a correctly written chemical equation.

Look again at the formula equation for the reaction of methane and oxygen.

$$CH_4(g) + O_2(g) \longrightarrow CO_2(g) + H_2O(g) \quad \text{(not balanced)}$$
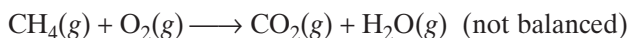
To balance the equation, begin by counting atoms of elements that are combined with atoms of other elements and that appear only once on each side of the equation. In this case, we could begin by counting either carbon or hydrogen atoms. Usually, the elements hydrogen and oxygen are balanced only after balancing all other elements in an equation. (You will read more about the rules of balancing equations later in the chapter.) Thus, we begin by counting carbon atoms.

Inspecting the formula equation reveals that there is one carbon atom on each side of the arrow. Therefore, carbon is already balanced in the equation. Counting hydrogen atoms reveals that there are four hydrogen atoms in the reactants but only two in the products. Two additional hydrogen atoms are needed on the right side of the equation. They can be added by placing the coefficient 2 in front of the chemical formula H_2O.

$$CH_4(g) + O_2(g) \longrightarrow CO_2(g) + 2H_2O(g) \quad \text{(partially balanced)}$$