

AP ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

UNIT 7

Atmospheric Pollution



7–10%
AP EXAM WEIGHTING



~11–12
CLASS PERIODS

Atmospheric Pollution

BIG IDEA 4

Sustainability **STB**

- Where does air pollution go once it is airborne?



Building Understanding

Air pollution has many sources and effects, both indoors and outdoors. Air is a natural resource that covers the Earth and crosses many system boundaries. Human activities affect the quality of the air both indoors and outdoors. Through legislation, the Clean Air Act regulates the emission of air pollutants that affect human health. The gases and particulates in the atmosphere come from both natural and human sources; once air pollution sources are identified, methods can be used to reduce it. Subsequent units will focus on pollution's impacts to land and water.

Building the Science Practices

5.B 5.C 7.D

In this unit, students can practice comparing and predicting patterns and/or trends in a graph or table to explain how the data or representation illustrates environmental concepts. They can also practice drawing conclusions about an environmental concept based on a comparison of the patterns and trends in a graph or table.

Students can also practice proposing solutions to combat the effects of air pollution on human health and, most importantly, using data or evidence to support their solutions. In order to understand the implications of environmental legislation, it is important to know how environmental policies are applied and what the outcomes are in a variety of contexts. With that knowledge, students can then explain why those outcomes occurred and how the policy affected the outcomes.

Preparing for the AP Exam

On the AP Exam, students must be able to describe or identify a research method used to understand air pollution. They will also have to explain the patterns and trends in data related to air pollution and describe the relationship among variables of data represented graphically. Students may benefit from time in class devoted to hands-on laboratory activities related to air pollution. Teachers can also provide students practice in identifying information from graphs, diagrams, or infographics related to air pollution. Students often struggle to identify specific air pollutants and related illnesses. To combat this, teacher can provide opportunities for students to identify air pollutants and their impacts on human health.

SUGGESTED SKILL

 *Scientific Experiments*

4.E

Explain modifications to an experimental procedure that will alter results.



AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)
- The Exam > [Chief Reader Report 2018, Q4](#)
- The Exam > [Student Performance Q&A 2016, Q3](#)
- The Exam > Samples and Commentary (2018, Q4, 2016, Q3)

TOPIC 7.1

Introduction to Air Pollution

Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

STB-2

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.A

Identify the sources and effects of air pollutants.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.A.1

Coal combustion releases air pollutants including carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, toxic metals, and particulates.

STB-2.A.2

The combustion of fossil fuels releases nitrogen oxides into the atmosphere. They lead to the production of ozone, formation of photochemical smog, and convert to nitric acid in the atmosphere, causing acid rain. Other pollutants produced by fossil fuel combustion include carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, and particulate matter.

STB-2.A.3

Air quality can be affected through the release of sulfur dioxide during the burning of fossil fuels, mainly diesel fuels.

STB-2.A.4

Through the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulated the use of lead, particularly in fuels, which dramatically decreased the amount of lead in the atmosphere.

STB-2.A.5

Air pollutants can be primary or secondary pollutants.

TOPIC 7.2

Photochemical Smog

SUGGESTED SKILL

 Data Analysis

5.B

Describe relationships among variables in data represented.



AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)

Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

STB-2

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.B

Explain the causes and effects of photochemical smog and methods to reduce it.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.B.1

Photochemical smog is formed when nitrogen oxides and volatile organic hydrocarbons react with heat and sunlight to produce a variety of pollutants.

STB-2.B.2

Many environmental factors affect the formation of photochemical smog.

STB-2.B.3

Nitrogen oxide is produced early in the day. Ozone concentrations peak in the afternoon and are higher in the summer because ozone is produced by chemical reactions between oxygen and sunlight.

STB-2.B.4

Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs), such as formaldehyde and gasoline, evaporate or sublime at room temperature. Trees are a natural source of VOCs.

STB-2.B.5

Photochemical smog often forms in urban areas because of the large number of motor vehicles there.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.B

Explain the causes and effects of photochemical smog and methods to reduce it.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.B.6

Photochemical smog can be reduced through the reduction of nitrogen oxide and VOCs.

STB-2.B.7

Photochemical smog can harm human health in several ways, including causing respiratory problems and eye irritation.

TOPIC 7.3

Thermal Inversion

Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

STB-2

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.C

Describe thermal inversion and its relationship with pollution.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.C.1

During a thermal inversion, the normal temperature gradient in the atmosphere is altered as the air temperature at the Earth's surface is cooler than the air at higher altitudes.

STB-2.C.2

Thermal inversion traps pollution close to the ground, especially smog and particulates.

SUGGESTED SKILL

Visual Representations

2.C

Explain how environmental concepts and processes represented visually relate to broader environmental issues.

**AVAILABLE RESOURCES**

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)

SUGGESTED SKILL

 *Scientific Experiments*

4.C

Describe an aspect of a research method, design, and/or measure used.



AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)

TOPIC 7.4

Atmospheric CO₂ and Particulates

Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

STB-2

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.D

Describe natural sources of CO₂ and particulates.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.D.1

CO₂ appears naturally in the atmosphere from sources such as respiration, decomposition, and volcanic eruptions.

STB-2.D.2

There are a variety of natural sources of particulate matter.

TOPIC 7.5

Indoor Air Pollutants

SUGGESTED SKILL

 Data Analysis

5.C

Explain patterns and trends in data to draw conclusions.



Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

STB-2

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.E

Identify indoor air pollutants.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.E.1

Carbon monoxide is an indoor air pollutant that is classified as an asphyxiant.

STB-2.E.2

Indoor air pollutants that are classified as particulates include asbestos, dust, and smoke.

STB-2.E.3

Indoor air pollutants can come from natural sources, human-made sources, and combustion.

STB-2.E.4

Common natural source indoor air pollutants include radon, mold, and dust.

STB-2.E.5

Common human-made indoor air pollutants include insulation, Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) from furniture, paneling and carpets; formaldehyde from building materials, furniture, upholstery, and carpeting; and lead from paints.

STB-2.E.6

Common combustion air pollutants include carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, particulates, and tobacco smoke.

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AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)
- The Exam > [Chief Reader Report 2018, Q1](#)
- The Exam > Student Performance Q&A ([2016](#), [Q3](#), [2014](#), [Q1](#))
- The Exam > Samples and Commentary ([2018, Q1](#), [2016, Q3](#), [2014, Q1](#))

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.E

Identify indoor air pollutants.

STB-2.F

Describe the effects of indoor air pollutants.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.E.7

Radon-222 is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that is produced by the decay of uranium found in some rocks and soils.

STB-2.F.1

Radon gas can infiltrate homes as it moves up through the soil and enters homes via the basement or cracks in the walls or foundation. It is also dissolved in groundwater that enters homes through a well.


STB-2.F.2

Exposure to radon gas can lead to radon-induced lung cancer, which is the second leading cause of lung cancer in America.

TOPIC 7.6

Reduction of
Air Pollutants

SUGGESTED SKILL

 *Environmental Solutions*

7.D

Use data and evidence to support a potential solution.



Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

STB-2

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.G

Explain how air pollutants can be reduced at the source.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.G.1

Methods to reduce air pollutants include regulatory practices, conservation practices, and alternative fuels.

STB-2.G.2

A vapor recovery nozzle is an air pollution control device on a gasoline pump that prevents fumes from escaping into the atmosphere when fueling a motor vehicle.

STB-2.G.3

A catalytic converter is an air pollution control device for internal combustion engines that converts pollutants (CO, NO_x, and hydrocarbons) in exhaust into less harmful molecules (CO₂, N₂, O₂, and H₂O).

STB-2.G.4

Wet and dry scrubbers are air pollution control devices that remove particulates and/or gases from industrial exhaust streams.

STB-2.G.5

Methods to reduce air pollution from coal-burning power plants include scrubbers and electrostatic precipitators.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)
- The Exam > [Chief Reader Report 2018, Q1](#)
- The Exam > [Student Performance Q&A 2016, Q3](#)
- The Exam > Samples and Commentary ([2018, Q1](#), [2016, Q3](#))

SUGGESTED SKILL

 *Scientific Experiments*

4.B

Identify a research method, design, and/or measure used.



AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)
- External Resource > [Environmental Literacy Council's AP Environmental Science Course Material](#)

TOPIC 7.7

Acid Rain

Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

STB-2

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

STB-2.H

Describe acid deposition.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

STB-2.H.1

Acid rain and deposition is due to nitrogen oxides and sulfur oxides from anthropogenic and natural sources in the atmosphere.

STB-2.H.2

Nitric oxides that cause acid deposition come from motor vehicles and coal-burning power plants. Sulfur dioxides that cause acid deposition come from coal-burning power plants.

STB-2.I

Describe the effects of acid deposition on the environment.

STB-2.I.1

Acid deposition mainly affects communities that are downwind from coal-burning power plants.

STB-2.I.2

Acid rain and deposition can lead to the acidification of soils and bodies of water and corrosion of human-made structures.


STB-2.I.3

Regional differences in soils and bedrock affect the impact that acid deposition has on the region—such as limestone bedrock's ability to neutralize the effect of acid rain on lakes and ponds.

TOPIC 7.8

Noise Pollution

SUGGESTED SKILL

 Text Analysis**3.C**

Describe the author's reasoning (use of evidence to support a claim).



AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Classroom Resource > [AP Environmental Science Teacher's Guide](#)

Required Course Content

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING**STB-2**

Human activities have physical, chemical, and biological consequences for the atmosphere.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE**STB-2.J**

Describe human activities that result in noise pollution and its effects.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE**STB-2.J.1**

Noise pollution is sound at levels high enough to cause physiological stress and hearing loss.

STB-2.J.2

Sources of noise pollution in urban areas include transportation, construction, and domestic and industrial activity.

STB-2.J.3

Some effects of noise pollution on animals in ecological systems include stress, the masking of sounds used to communicate or hunt, damaged hearing, and causing changes to migratory routes.