

Molecular Biology Through Discovery
Problem Set 7: The Coding Problem

1. Using a convenient genetic code table, complete the following:

DNA double helix					A	G					A	
				T			G			T		
mRNA transcribed	5'			A					U			
Appropriate tRNA anticodon						U		G				5'
Amino acids incorporated into protein		met										

2. Consider the RNA sequence below. Suppose that the fourth base, C, were mutated to a U.

GAGCGUGCGAACC

- 2a. How many amino acids might be affected if the code were nonoverlapping triplet?
- 2b. How many if the code were overlapping triplet?
- 2c. Partially overlapping triplet?
- 2d. How would your answers be affected if the mutation were a deletion of the C?
3. Describe every instance you know of where base pairing is critical. Draw a crude picture of each.
4. You want to determine whether nitrogen fixation is taking place in a lake deep below the Antarctic permafrost. You could try to measure nitrogen fixation directly, but it is impossible to get to the lake with the necessary equipment, and a laboratory measurement of fixation in lake water sampled from the lake would be fraught with uncertainty. You therefore decide an indirect approach: isolating DNA from a lake water sample and determining whether there are any genes present that encode nitrogenase, the enzyme responsible for nitrogen fixation.

To do this, you need to amplify the genes using PCR... but how do you design PCR primers to amplify a gene whose DNA sequence is not known? There is hope. Nitrogenase is a highly conserved protein, and you have some confidence that even weird Antarctic bacteria will have nitrogenase proteins that are similar to all others.

Below is a consensus sequence of nitrogenase proteins, found by comparing 13 different nitrogenase proteins (the beginning and end of the consensus sequence is not shown). Letters are given when all 13 nitrogenases have the same amino acid at that position. A hyphen indicates that the position shows variability amongst the sequences.

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          10          20          30          40          50
RQIAFYGKGGIGKSTT-QNT-A--A-----RI-IVGCDPKADSTRL-L-K
AQ---L--AAE-G-VED-EL--V---G-----CVESGGPEPGVGCAGRGI
IT-INFLEE-GAY-D--FV-YDVLGDVVCGGFAMPIRE-KAQEIYIV-SG
EMMAMYAANNIARG-LKYA--GGVRLGGLICNSR

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Your goal is to design forwards and a backwards primers to amplify a part of the nitrogenase genes of any nitrogen-fixing cyanobacteria that happen to be in the lake water. The primers should:

- be based on the consensus amino acid sequence
- each be at least 14 nucleotides in length
- amplify a DNA fragment at least 100 nucleotides in length
- guarantee amplification of any target DNA that encodes a nitrogenase that matches the consensus amino acid sequence

You will find that no one DNA sequence will fit the last criterion, so you're permitted to specify *degenerate* primers with ambiguous positions. For example, AG[CG] is a degenerate sequence, because the third position can be either C or G. This leads to the fourth condition

- The degenerate primer sequence should be as unambiguous as possible. For example AG[CG] (two possibilities) is less ambiguous than [GT]G[CG] (four possibilities)

Provide the two degenerate primer sequences that fulfill these conditions and calculate how many possible sequences each degenerate primer matches.

5. Suppose that every Virginia resident is to be assigned an ID number, except that it will be in the form of a DNA sequence. How long would the DNA sequence need to be to allow for a unique sequence for every resident? ***Provide details of your calculation plus any assumptions you made.*** Extra credit: Choose the sequence that would be your own ID.
6. We live in a world in which genes determine the linear sequence of amino acids that comprise a protein. There are only 20 possible amino acids that may be encoded (putting aside some specialized cases), and there are no restrictions as to what amino acid sequences are possible to encode.
 - 6a. How many possible dipeptides are there? In other words, if you chop up all possible proteins (every conceivable sequence) into two amino acid-segments, how many different kinds of amino acid pairs would you get?

The remaining questions concern an alternate universe in which the genetic code consists of overlapping triplets, each codon overlapping the next by two nucleotides.

- 6b.** Consider the triplet codon CAG. How many pairs of adjacent codons are possible in which the first codon of the pair is CAG? What is the maximum number of dipeptides that can be encoded by all of those pairs?
- 6c.** How many possible triplet codons are there?
- 6d.** How many possible pairs of adjacent triplet codons are there? What is the maximum number of dipeptides that can be encoded by all of those pairs?
- 6e.** Suppose that the overlapping triplet genetic code we're considering is degenerate, that is more than one triplet may encode the same amino acid. If the dipeptides shown below are found in nature, how many triplets, at minimum, must encode histidine (His)?

His-Lys, His-Ser, His-Leu, His-Thr, His-Phe, His-Pro

Lys-His, Ser-His, Cys-His, Arg-His, Val-His, Phe-His, Glu-His, Gln-His, Ile-His

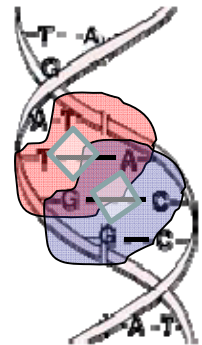
- 6f.** It is 1957. There are many partial amino acid sequences of proteins known, but DNA sequencing is 20 years in the future. Can you think of a way to use known protein sequences to test the proposition that the genetic code consists of overlapping triplets?
- 6g.** You might enjoy reading the following article:

Brenner S (1957). On the impossibility of all overlapping triplet codes in information transfer from nucleic acid to proteins. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 43:687-694.

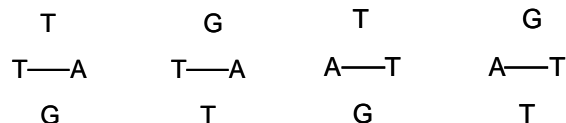
- 7.** In 1954, George Gamow published the first attempt to conceive a genetic code. You can read about it in this very short article:

Gamow G (1954). Possible relation between deoxyribonucleic acid and protein structures. *Nature* 173:318.

Although Gamow was a fine artist (he illustrated his own popular science books), it may be difficult for you to interpret his rendition of the double helix. Each diamond in the article's figure lies within four nucleotides, defined by a basepair, one nucleotide above it, and one nucleotide below it. I've tried to clarify its message in the figure to the right. Each diamond is an amino acid binding site, surrounded by four nucleotides (highlighted in red for one diamond and blue for the other).



- 7a.** Make up a genetic code that satisfies Gamow's criteria. The box on the next page should be helpful. I suggest that you first make some arbitrary assignment (i.e. one of the 64 codons codes for some arbitrary amino acid), determine what other codons must code for the same amino acid, and then proceed along the same vein. Note that in his scheme, there is no concept of 5' and 3' and so the following diamonds are all equivalent:



codon	aa	codon	aa	codon	aa	codon	aa
TTT		TCT		TAT		TGT	
TTC		TCC		TAC		TGC	
TTA		TCA		TAA		TGA	
TTG		TCG		TAG		TGG	
CTT		CCT		CAT		CGT	
CTC		CCC		CAC		CGC	
CTA		CCA		CAA		CGA	
CTG		CCG		CAG		CGG	
ATT		ACT		AAT		AGT	
ATC		ACC		AAC		AGC	
ATA		ACA		AAA		AGA	
ATG		ACG		AAG		AGG	
GTT		GCT		GAT		GGT	
GTC		GCC		GAC		GGC	
GTA		GCA		GAA		GGA	
GTG		GCG		GAG		GGG	

7b. Based on the genetic code you just made up, what is the DNA sequence that would encode Gly-Ala-Gly? Phe-Ala-Phe?

7c. Show that no code that follows Gamow's criteria could ever encode both of these tripeptides.