GENERAL

molecular orbital theory practice problems

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Introduction

When studying chemistry, students often encounter the transition from simple Lewis structures to more sophisticated models that explain the behavior of electrons in molecules. One of the most powerful frameworks in this evolution is **molecular orbital (MO) theory**. Unlike the valence bond approach, MO theory considers electrons as delocalized over the entire molecule, allowing chemists to predict a wide range of properties such as bond strengths, magnetic behavior, and spectroscopic transitions.

While the conceptual foundations of MO theory are fascinating, mastering the subject requires more than reading textbooks. It demands consistent practice, especially through targeted **practice problems**. These exercises force students to apply core principles, identify patterns, and troubleshoot errors—skills essential for both academic success and professional research.

In this article, we'll explore why practice problems are indispensable, outline the most common types of questions, walk through a detailed step by step solution strategy, provide a curated set of sample problems with solutions, and share practical tips to sharpen your MO skills. By the end, you'll have a comprehensive toolkit to tackle any MO theory question with confidence.

Understanding Molecular Orbital Theory

Basic Concepts

Molecular orbital theory treats a molecule as a system of atomic orbitals (AOs) that combine to form new orbitals that extend over the entire molecule. These **molecular orbitals**can be bonding, antibonding, or non bonding, each with distinct energies and electron densities. The key idea is that electrons occupy the lowest energy MOs first, following the Pauli exclusion principle and Hund's rule.

Bonding vs Antibonding Orbitals

When two atomic orbitals overlap constructively, they form a **bonding orbital** that stabilizes the molecule by lowering its energy. Conversely, destructive overlap creates an **antibonding orbital**, raising the energy and destabilizing the system. The relative energies of these orbitals dictate the overall stability and reactivity of the molecule.

Electron Configuration in MO Theory

Electron distribution in MOs is represented by the **electron configuration** of the molecule. The total number of electrons equals the sum of valence electrons from all constituent atoms. Electrons fill the MOs in ascending order of energy, with each orbital accommodating a maximum of two electrons with opposite spins. This arrangement allows chemists to calculate **bond order**, a measure of bond strength, as the difference between the number of electrons in bonding and antibonding orbitals divided by two.

Why Practice Problems Are Essential

Bridging Theory and Application

Concepts such as orbital symmetry, energy ordering, and electron pairing are abstract when presented only in lecture slides. Practice problems translate these ideas into concrete calculations, reinforcing learning through repetition. They also expose students to the nuances of real molecules, where multiple orbitals interact and symmetry considerations become critical.

Assessing Mastery

Solving practice problems provides immediate feedback. When a student can correctly construct an MO diagram, fill electrons, and predict properties, it confirms a solid grasp of the material. Conversely, recurring mistakes highlight gaps that need targeted review. This diagnostic function is invaluable for both instructors and learners.

Common Types of Molecular Orbital Theory Practice Problems

Electron Counting

These problems ask you to determine the total number of valence electrons in a molecule, a prerequisite for building accurate MO diagrams. They often involve molecules with heteroatoms or multiple bonds, requiring careful bookkeeping.

MO Diagrams

Students are given a molecule and must draw the energy diagram, indicating bonding, antibonding, and non bonding orbitals. This exercise tests understanding of orbital symmetry, energy ordering, and the interaction between s, p, and d orbitals.

Bond Order Calculations

After filling the MOs, the student calculates the bond order to predict the molecule's stability. Bond order also correlates with bond length and vibrational frequency, linking MO theory to experimental data.

Spectroscopic Predictions

MO theory explains electronic transitions observed in UV Vis, IR, and Raman spectroscopy. Practice problems may ask you to identify allowed transitions, predict absorption wavelengths, or explain selection rules based on symmetry.

Comparing with Valence Bond Theory

Some exercises juxtapose MO and VB predictions for the same molecule, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each model. This comparative analysis deepens conceptual understanding and clarifies when each theory is most appropriate.

Step by Step Guide to Solving MO Practice Problems

Identify the Molecule

Begin by reading the problem statement carefully. Note the molecular formula, the types of atoms involved, and any special features such as resonance structures or charge states. This information determines the starting point for electron counting.

Determine Atomic Orbitals

List the valence orbitals of each atom. For example, carbon contributes one 2s and three 2p orbitals, while oxygen contributes one 2s and three 2p orbitals. For transition metals, include d orbitals as necessary. Remember that only valence orbitals participate in bonding.

Construct MO Diagram

Arrange the atomic orbitals in order of increasing energy. Combine them according to symmetry rules: orbitals of the same symmetry can interact, while those of different symmetry cannot. Use the **linear combination of atomic orbitals (LCAO)**principle to form bonding and antibonding MOs. For polyatomic molecules, consider group theory to determine orbital symmetries.

Fill Electrons

Count the total number of valence electrons and distribute them into the MOs following the Aufbau principle, Pauli exclusion, and Hund's rule. Keep track of electron spin when necessary, especially for open shell species.

Calculate Bond Order

Use the formula: **Bond Order = (Number of electrons in bonding MOs – Number of electrons in antibonding MOs) ÷ 2**. A positive bond order indicates a stable bond, while a zero or negative bond order suggests instability or non bonding behavior.

Predict Properties

Link the MO diagram and bond order to observable properties. For example, a higher bond order generally means a shorter, stronger bond and a higher vibrational frequency. Antibonding electrons often lead to paramagnetism. Use these insights to answer questions about magnetic behavior, reactivity, or spectroscopic transitions.

Sample Practice Problems

Problem 1: Hydrogen Molecule (H ,)

1. Count the valence electrons.
2. Construct the MO diagram.
3. Fill electrons and calculate bond order.
4. Predict magnetic behavior.

Solution:

- Each H atom contributes 1 electron !' 2 electrons total.
- Two 1s AOs combine to form a bonding 1<6r æB â çF–&öæF–ær Ãu orbital.
- Both electrons occupy the bonding 1<6r ÷&&—F Â , 2'à Antibonding orbital remains empty.
- Bond order = (2 – 0)/2 = 1 !' a single bond. H , is diamagnetic because all electrons are paired.

Problem 2: Oxygen Molecule (O ,)

1. Determine electron count.
2. Draw the MO diagram including <2 æB À orbitals.
3. Assign electrons and compute bond order.
4. Explain its paramagnetic nature.

Solution:

- Each O atom contributes 6 valence electrons !' 12 electrons total.
- MO ordering for O ,: <2ƒ'2'Â Ã*(2s), <2ƒ' ¢'Â À(2px, 2py), < ¢ƒ' ,Â ' y), <2¢ƒ' ¢'à Note that for second row elements, <
- Electron filling: <2ƒ'2›"Â Ã*(2s)², <2ƒ' ¢›"Â À(2px, 2py) t, < ¢ƒ' ,Â ' y)². The <2¢ƒ' ¢' &VÖ –ç2 V× G•.
- Bond order = (10 bonding – 2 antibonding)/2 = 4/2 = 2. O , has a double bond. The two < ¢ VÆV7G&öç2 &R unpaired, giving O , paramagnetic.

Problem 3: Carbon Dioxide (CO ,)

1. Count electrons.
2. Construct the MO diagram for a linear molecule.
3. Fill electrons and find bond order.
4. Predict bond length relative to C–O single bond.

Solution:

- Carbon (4) + two oxygens (6 each) = 16 electrons.
- MO diagram: <2ƒ'2'Â Ã*(2s), <2ƒ' ¢'Â À(2px, 2py), < ¢ƒ' ,Â ' y), <2¢ƒ' ¢'à

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