Astrobiology
Lecture 4

Metabolic & genetic macromolecules

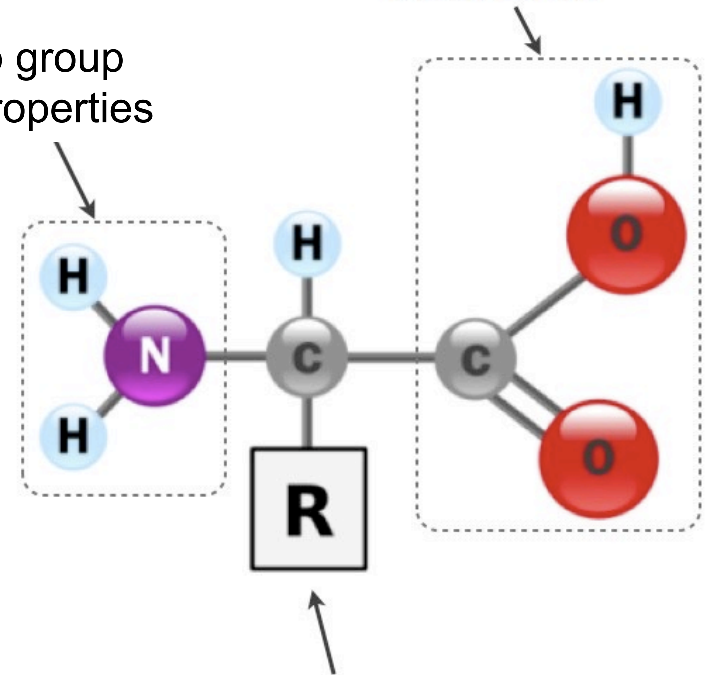
University of Trieste, 2023
Giovanni Vladilo (INAF-OATs)

Biological amino acids

Constituents of proteins

The carboxyl group
has acid properties

The amino group
has basic properties



The lateral group determines the
chemical properties specific of each
amino acid

Proteins

Proteins are <u>polymers of amino acids</u>

Short chains of amino acids are called <u>peptydes</u>

Long, unbranched peptyde chains are called <u>polypeptides</u>

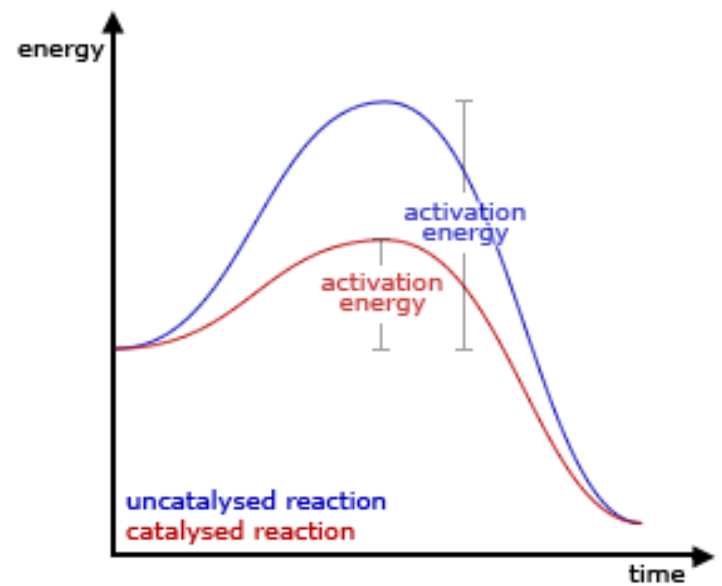
Proteins are formed by one or more chains of polypeptides

Molecular masses of proteins vary between $\sim 10^3$ e $\sim 10^6$ atomic mass units

They contribute to about half the mass of the cell

Proteins play fundamental functions in living organisms

Mostly <u>structural</u> and <u>enzymatic</u> (i.e., catalytic) functions



Terrestrial biological amino acids

Proteins use only 20 types of amino acids

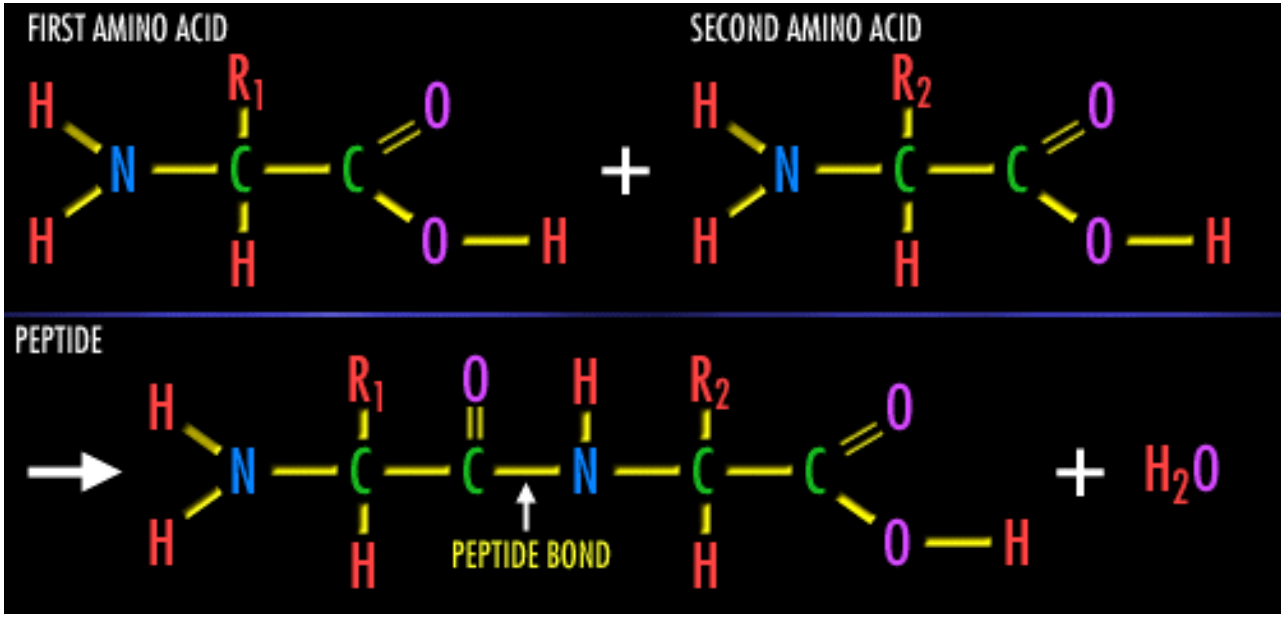
Organic chemistry allows for the existence of thousands of amino acids

Apparently, terrestrial life has "chosen" a short list of amino acids, sufficiently representative of the different types of chemical properties that are required to build up the variety of proteins necessary to living organisms

Table 7.2 *The Twenty Amino Acids Found in Living Organisms*

*Amino Acid**	*Chemical Formula*	*Number of Atoms*
L-Alanine	$C_3H_7O_2N$	13
L-Arginine	$C_6H_{15}O_2N_4$	27
L-Asparagine	$C_4H_8O_3N_2$	17
L-Aspartic Acid	$C_4H_6O_4N$	15
L-Cysteine	$C_3H_7O_2NS$	14
L-Glutamic Acid	$C_5H_8O_4N$	18
L-Glutamine	$C_5H_{10}O_3N_2$	20
Glycine	$C_2H_5O_2N$	10
L-Histidine	$C_6H_9O_2N_3$	20
L-Isoleucine	$C_6H_{13}O_2N$	22
L-Leucine	$C_6H_{13}O_2N$	22
L-Lysine	$C_6H_{15}O_2N_2$	25
L-Methionine	$C_5H_{11}O_2NS$	20
L-Phenylalanine	$C_9H_{11}O_2N$	23
L-Proline	$C_5H_9O_2N$	17
L-Serine	$C_3H_7O_3N$	14
L-Threonine	$C_4H_9O_3N$	17
L-Tryptophan	$C_{11}H_{12}O_2N_2$	27
L-Tyrosine	$C_9H_{11}O_3N$	24
L-Valine	$C_5H_{11}O_2N$	19

From amino acids to polypeptides



Amino acids are bound to each other with peptide bonds

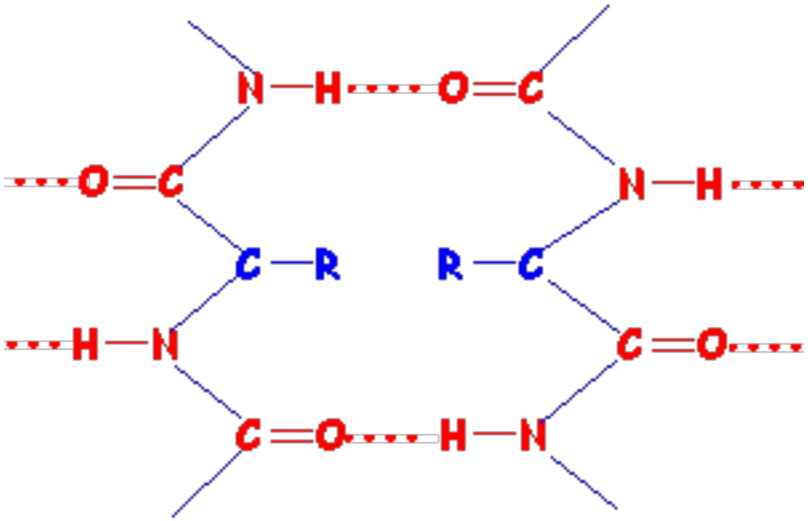
The carboxyl end ties to the amino end of the next molecule

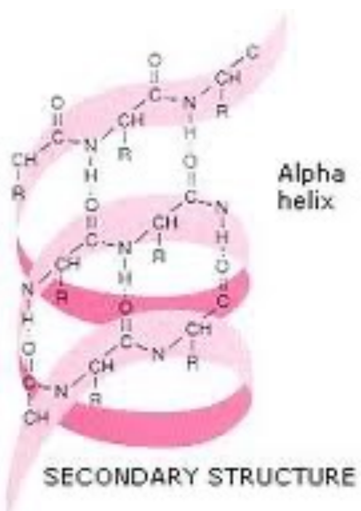
A sequence OC-NH is formed (peptide bond)

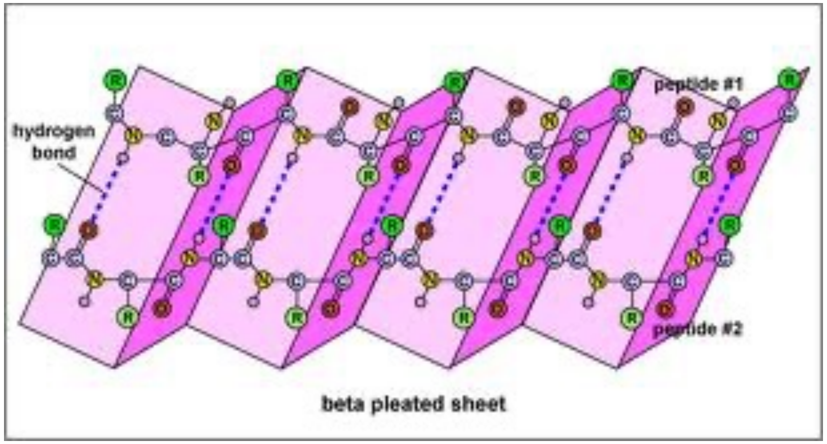
A water molecule is released each time a peptide bond is created

A water molecule is required to break a peptide bond

From polypeptides to 3D proteins
Importance of hydrogen bonds as intramolecular forces



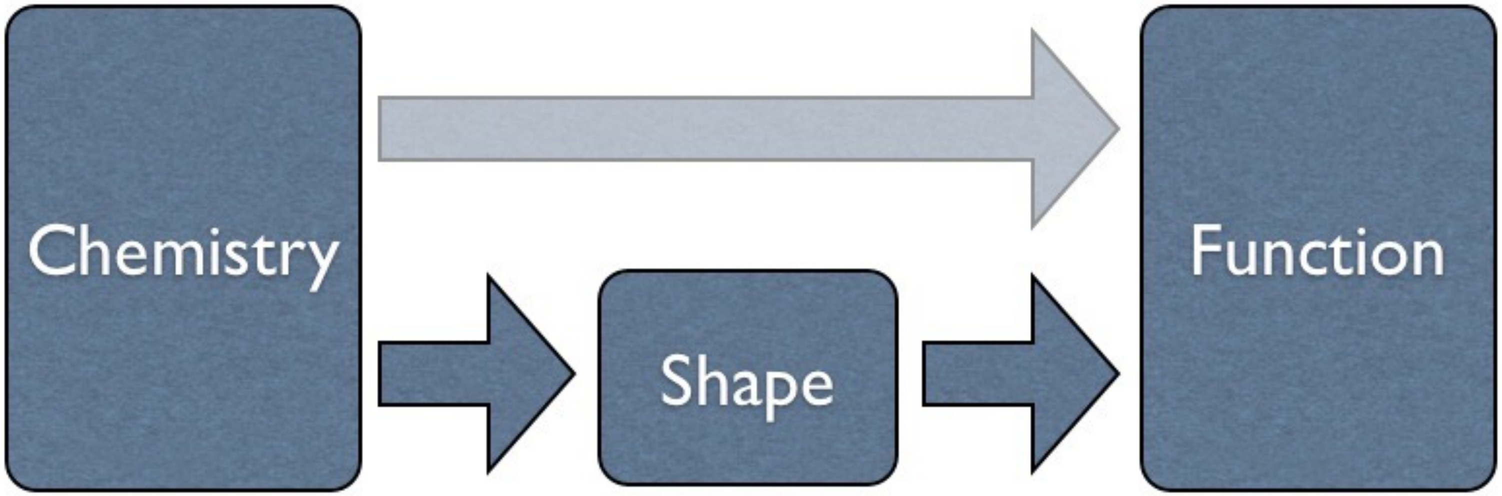


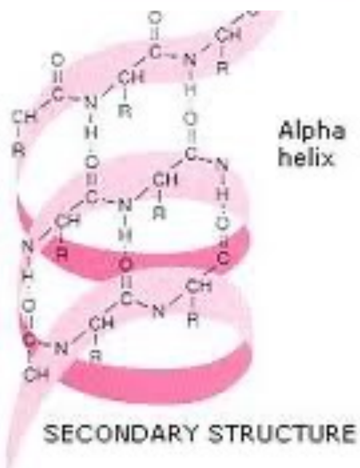


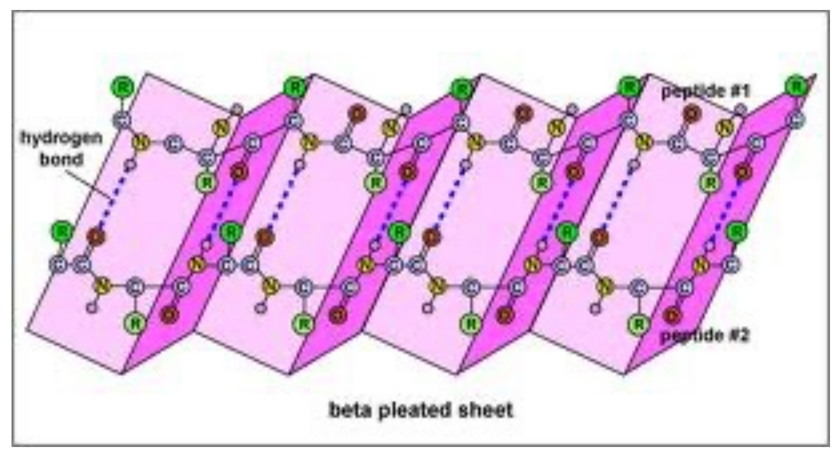
Proteins

The importance of 3D structures

The shape of proteins determines, in large part, their function







Chirality

Molecules with same chemical formula but different structure are called <u>isomers</u>

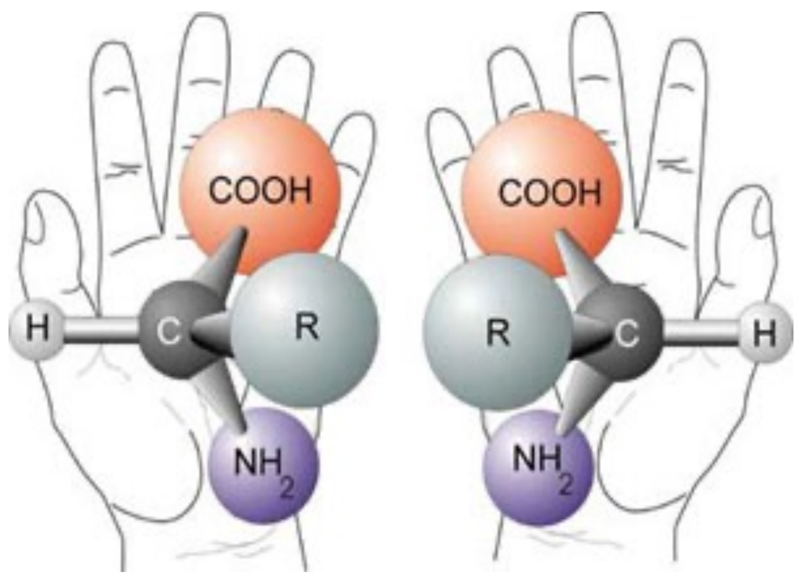
<u>Chiral</u> molecules are isomers with a center of symmetry ("stereocenter")

They cannot be superimposed to their mirror image

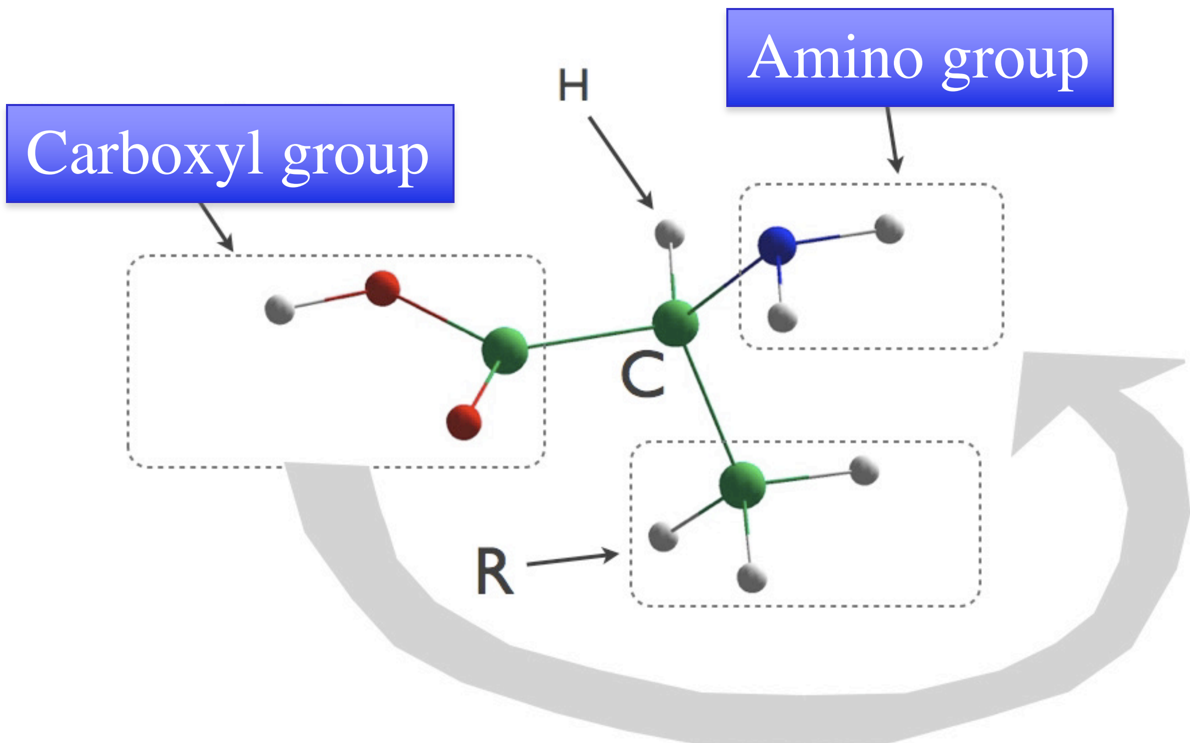
The two mirror images of a chiral molecule are called <u>enantiomers</u>

Amino acids are chiral

The carbon atom at the center of the amino acid is the <u>stereocenter</u>



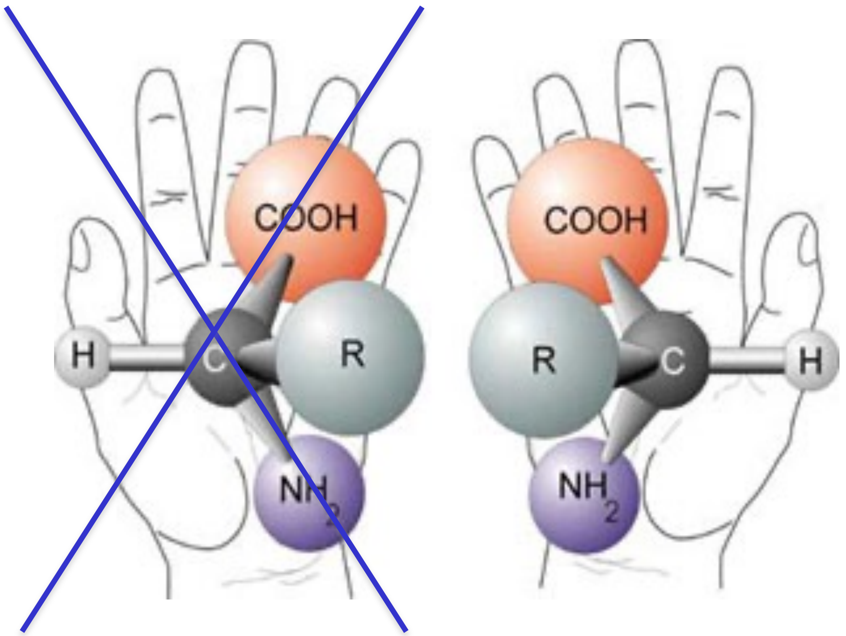
The two enantiomers of amino acids are called L and D according to the "CORN" convention



Example of L-type amino acid: L-alanine

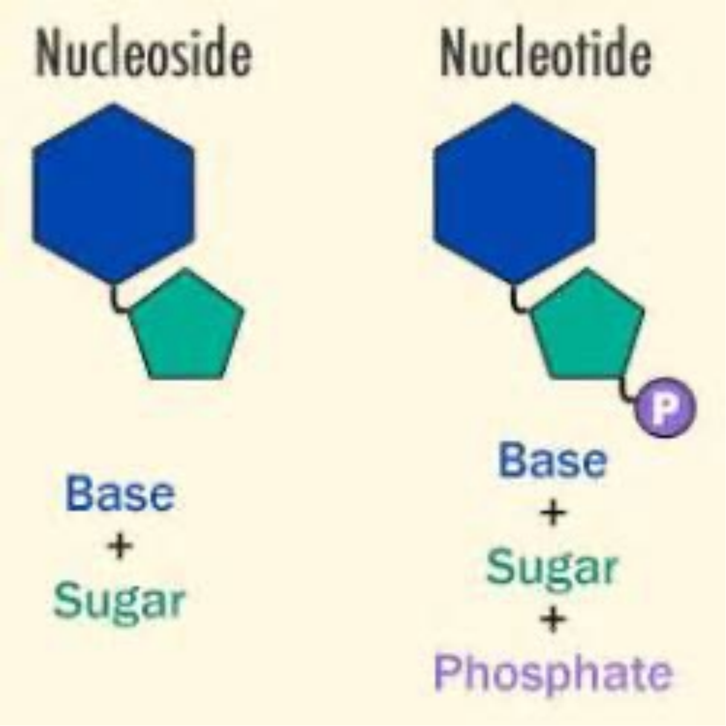
Homochirality of biomolecules

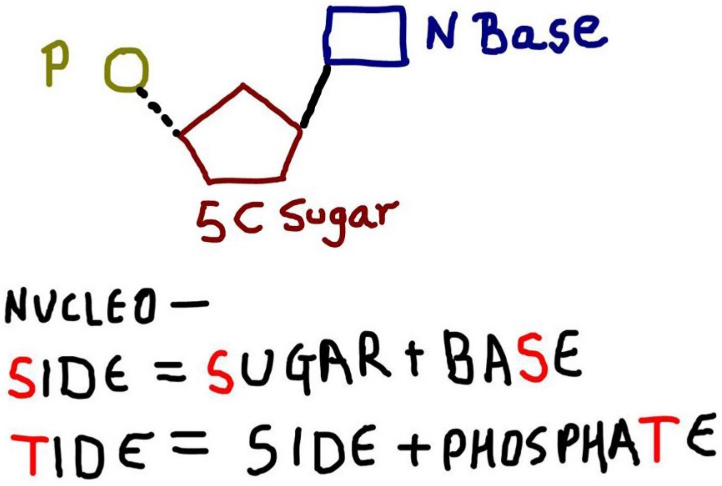
Protein amino acids are <u>homochiral</u>:
they only show the L-type enantiomer



Nucleosides and nucleotides

Constituents of the DNA and RNA

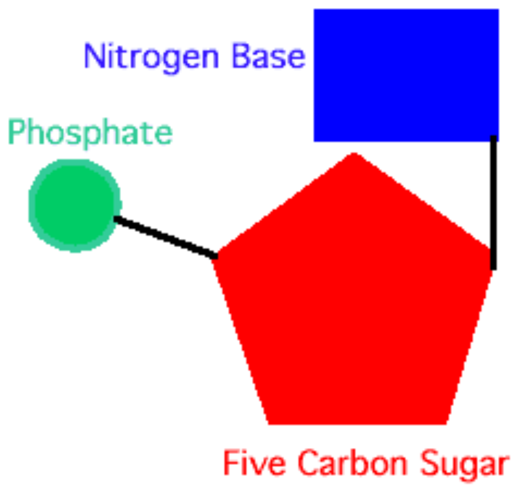




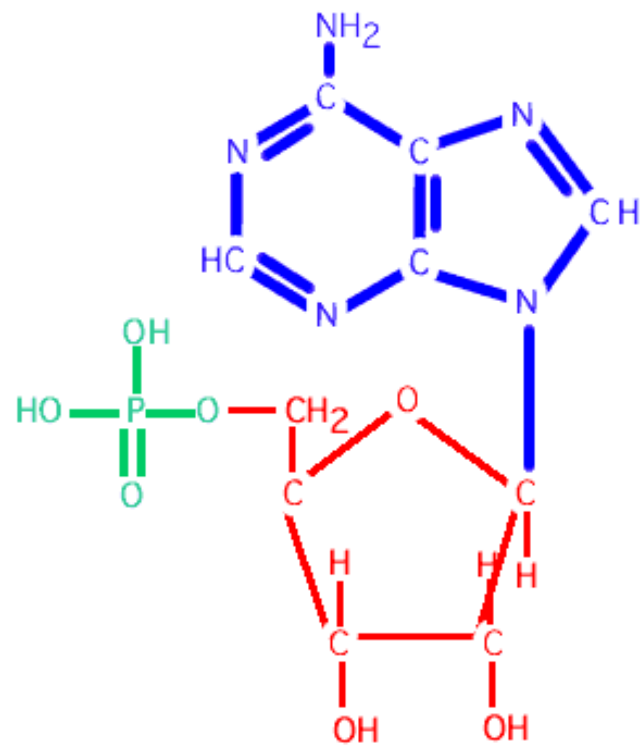
Nucleotides

Constituents of the DNA and RNA

Basic Nucleotide Structure



Example

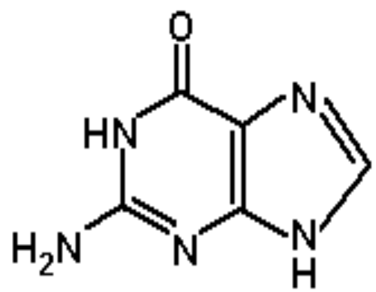


Adenosine 5' phosphoric acid

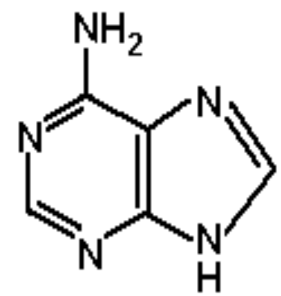
Nitrogen bases

aromatic rings with N substitutions

Purines

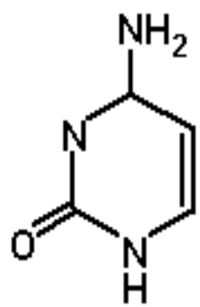


Guanin

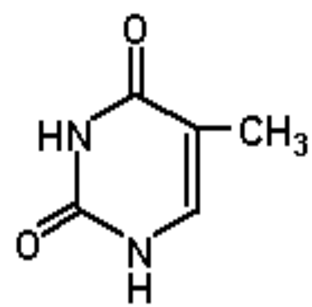


Adenin

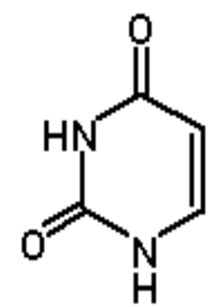
Pyrimidines



Cytosin



Thymin



Uracil

Nucleic acids

Nucleic acids are polymers of nucleotides

Depending on the type of organism,
they may contain ~ 10^6 – 10^8 nucleotides

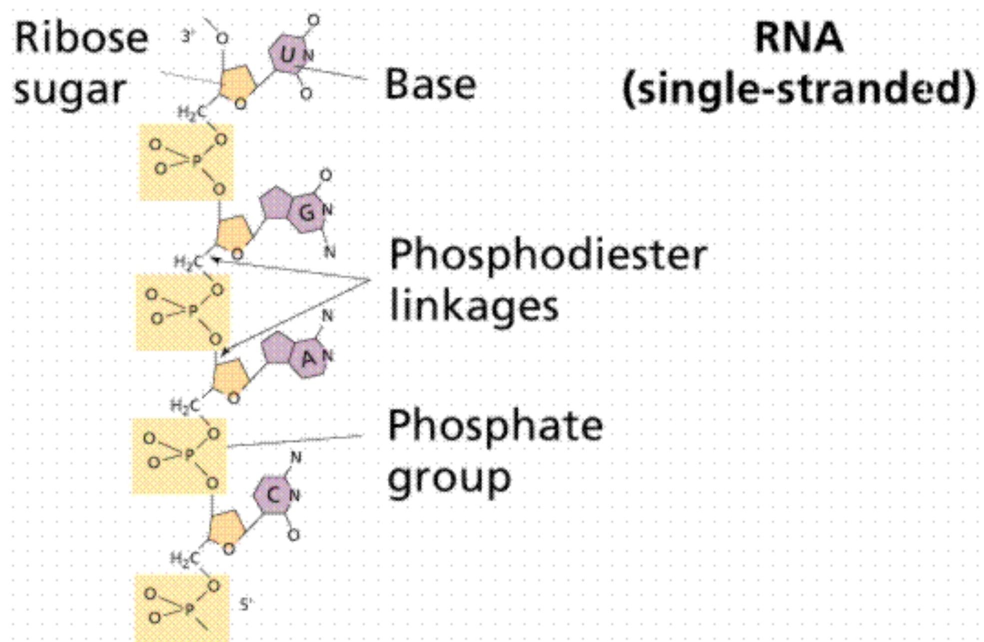
Nucleic acids store and use the genetic information

There are two types: DNA and RNA
DNA preserves the information
RNA, which comes in different forms, uses the information
for driving metabolic/replication processes

Nucleic acids: RNA

RNA has a single strand of nucleotides

The backbone of the strand is made up of a sequence of phosphate groups and <u>ribose</u> sugars



Has 4 types of nucleobases

Purines

- Adenine, Guanine

Pyrimidines

- Cytosine, Uracyl

RNA drives the synthesis of proteins

The order of the nitrogen bases on the backbone determines the sequence in which amino acids are assembled

Nucleic acids: DNA

DNA has two strands that form a double helix structure

The backbone of each strand is made up of a sequence of phosphate groups and deoxyribose sugars

DNA has 4 types of nucleobases

- 2 purins
  - Adenine e Guanine
- 2 pyrimidins
  - Cytosine e Thymine
    - Thymine replaces Uracyl, which is instead used in the RNA

The complementarity of purines and pyrimidines is essential for pairing the two strands

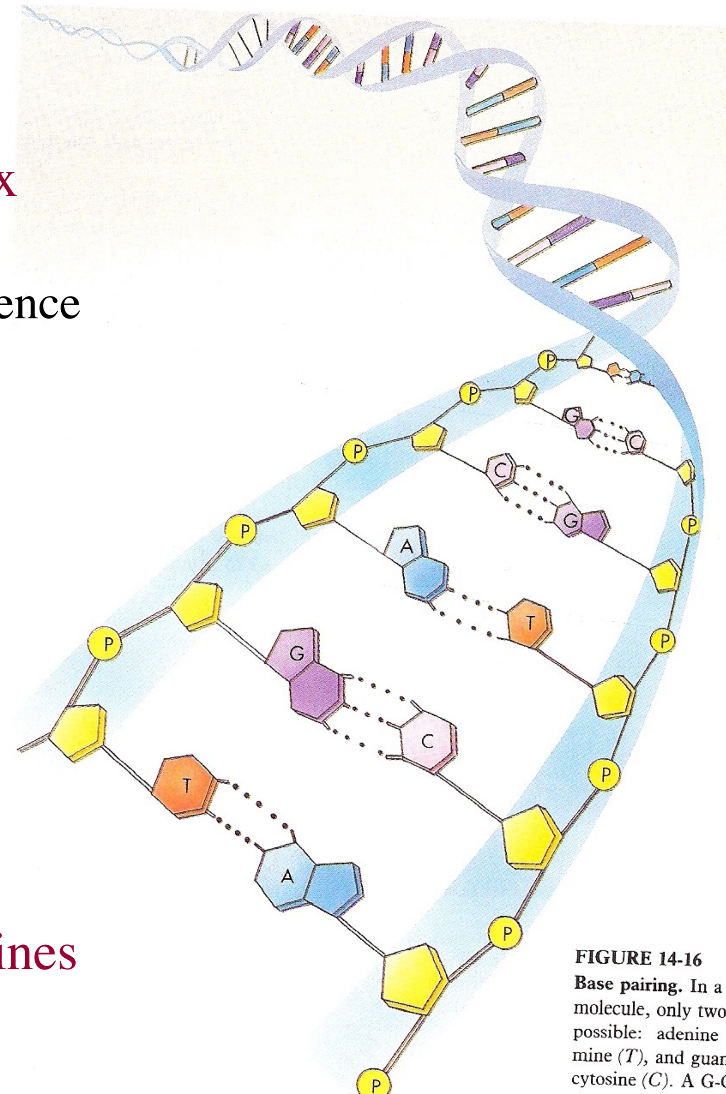


FIGURE 14-16
Base pairing. In a DNA
molecule, only two base p
possible: adenine (*A*) w
mine (*T*), and guanine (*G*
cytosine (*C*). A G-C base
three hydrogen bonds; an
base pair, only two.

Hydrogen bonds in the DNA

The two strands of the DNA are tied up by hydrogen bonds

G-C pairs have 3 bonds

T-A pairs have 2 bonds

Hydrogen bonds as intramolecular forces

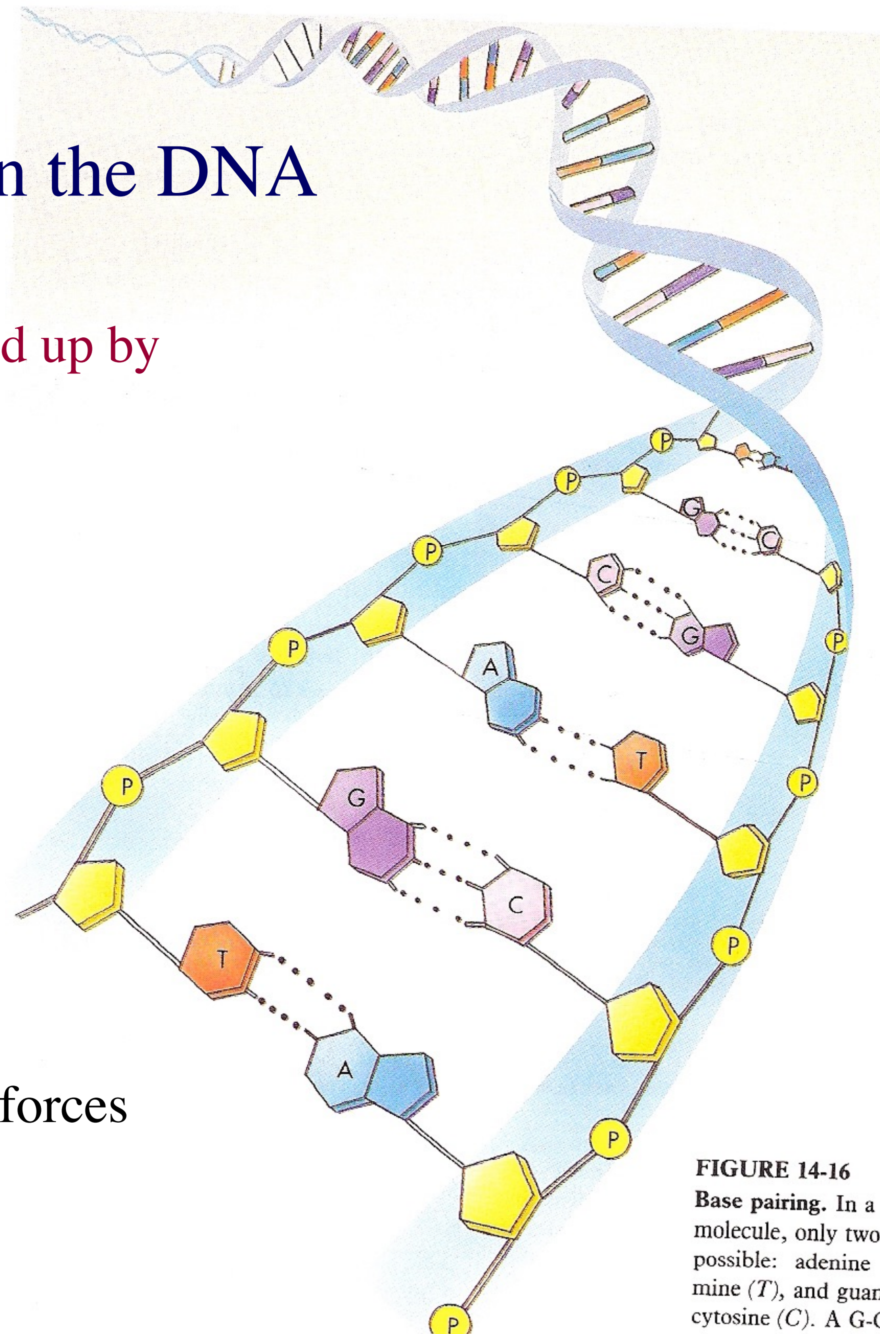


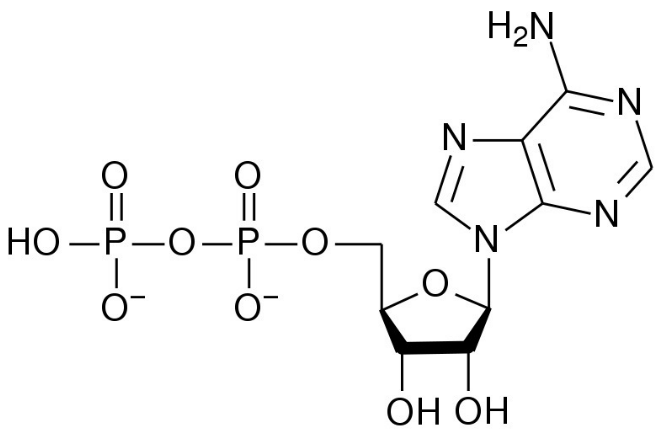
FIGURE 14-16
Base pairing. In a DNA molecule, only two base p… possible: adenine (*A*) w… mine (*T*), and guanine (*G*… cytosine (*C*). A G-C base… three hydrogen bonds; an… base pair, only two.

ADP & ATP

Energy exchange molecules

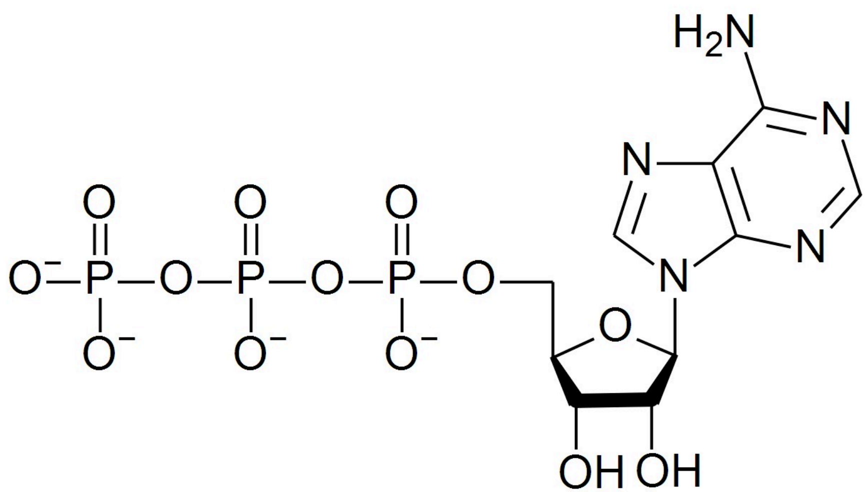
ADP

Adenosine diphosphate



ATP

Adenosine triphosphate



Genetic information

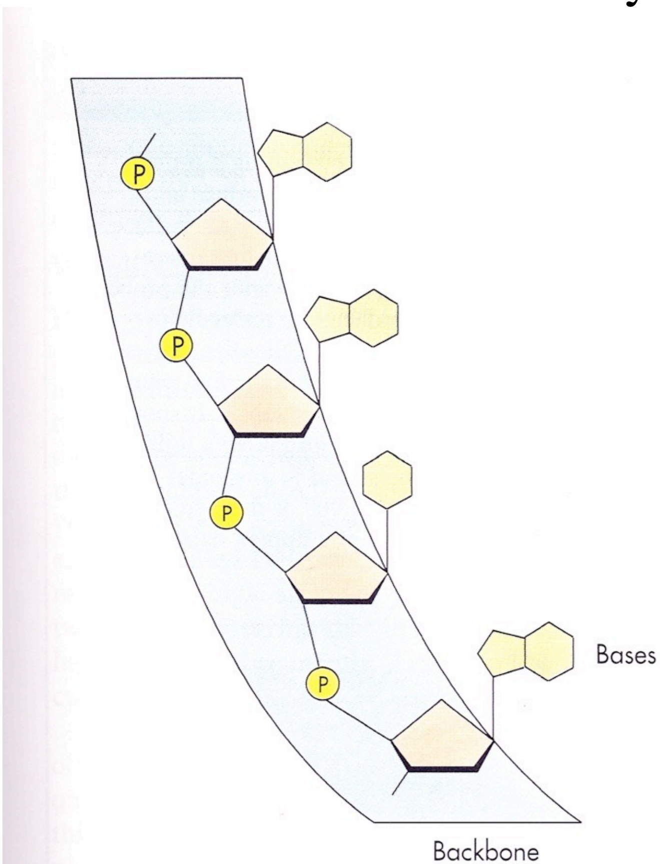
The order of the nucleobases attached to the backbone of the nucleic acids determines the genetic information, which is therefore stored in digital form

The order of the nucleobases is not constrained by chemical laws

We believe this is the result of natural selection at early stages of life evolution

Digital information is more stable than analogic information

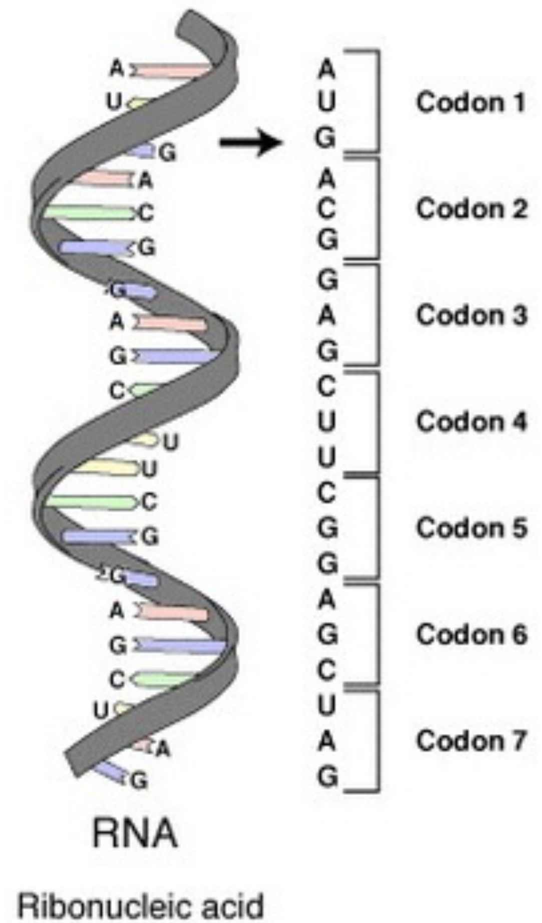
Terrestrial life has started to use digital information more than 3.5 billon years ago



The genetic information and genetic code

The <u>digital information</u> is coded <u>in triplets of nucleobases</u> called <u>codons</u>

Each codon uses 3 of the 4 nucleobases and can express 4^3=64 possible combinations, equivalent to 6 bits of information ($64=2^6$)



Each codon uniquely identifies a single amino acid

Some aminoacids are coded by more than one codon

(example of unplanned evolution)

Some codons are used as a “stop” signal of the sequence

Correspondence between RNA codons and amino acids

A=Adenine
G=Guanine
C=Citosine
U=Uracyl

Second letter

First letter	U	C	A	G	Third letter
U	UUU Phe	UCU Ser	UAU Tyr	UGU Cys	U
U	UUC Phe	UCC Ser	UAC Tyr	UGC Cys	C
U	UUA Leu	UCA Ser	UAA Stop	UGA Stop	A
U	UUG Leu	UCG Ser	UAG Stop	UGG Trp	G
C	CUU Leu	CCU Pro	CAU His	CGU Arg	U
C	CUC Leu	CCC Pro	CAC His	CGC Arg	C
C	CUA Leu	CCA Pro	CAA Gln	CGA Arg	A
C	CUG Leu	CCG Pro	CAG Gln	CGG Arg	G
A	AUU Ile	ACU Thr	AAU Asn	AGU Ser	U
A	AUC Ile	ACC Thr	AAC Asn	AGC Ser	C
A	AUA Ile	ACA Thr	AAA Lys	AGA Arg	A
A	AUG Met	ACG Thr	AAG Lys	AGG Arg	G
G	GUU Val	GCU Ala	GAU Asp	GGU Gly	U
G	GUC Val	GCC Ala	GAC Asp	GGC Gly	C
G	GUA Val	GCA Ala	GAA Glu	GGA Gly	A
G	GUG Val	GCG Ala	GAG Glu	GGG Gly	G

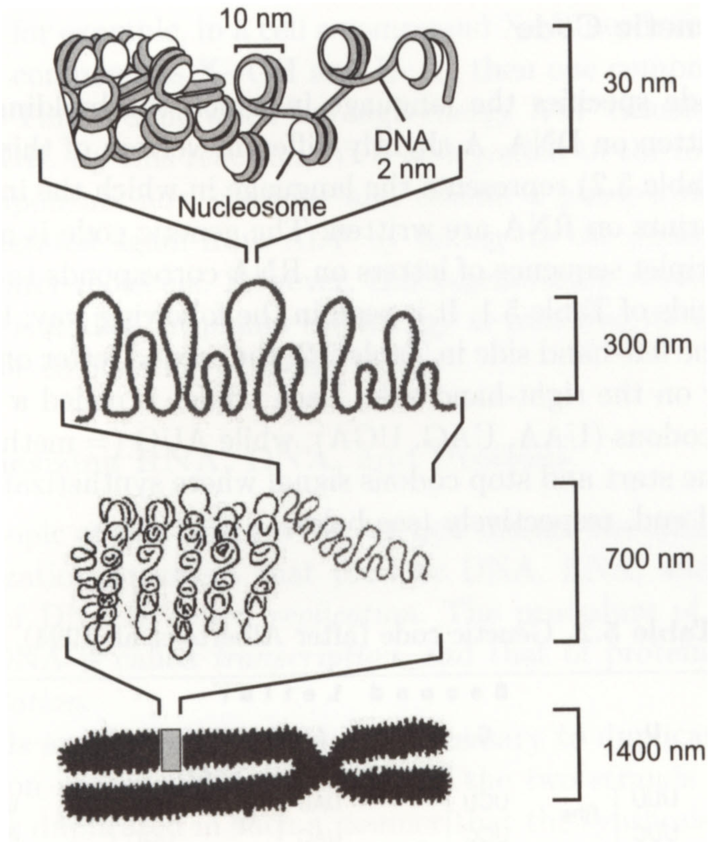
Genes

From the structural point of view, a gene is a sequence of nucleobases along a strand of a nucleic acid

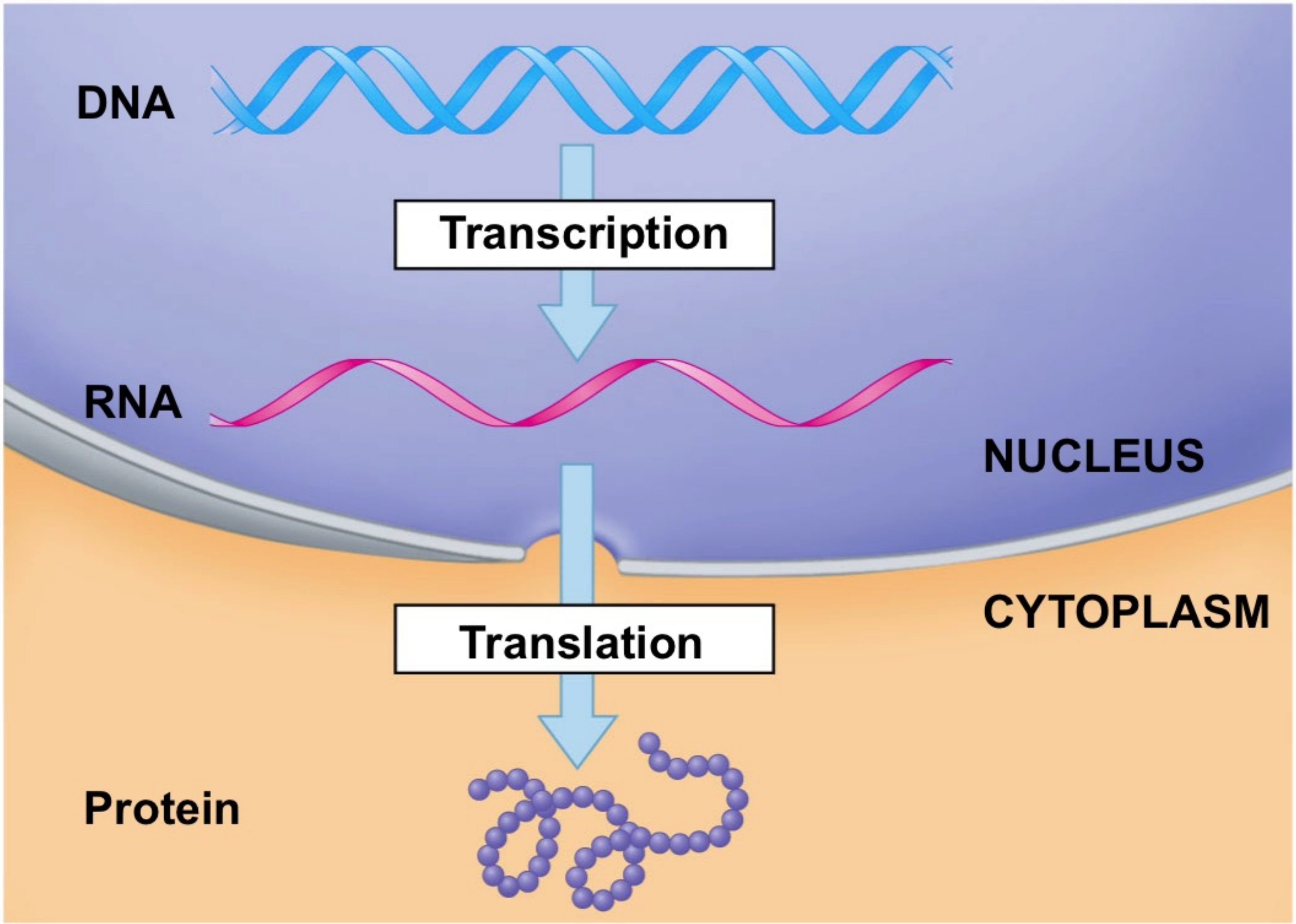
From the point of view of the information content, a gene is a sequence of instructions with a specific function

> Typically, a sequence that specifies how to build up a specific amino acid

In complex organisms, the number of genes is extremely high and this is why DNA needs to be stored in very compact structures, such as chromosomes



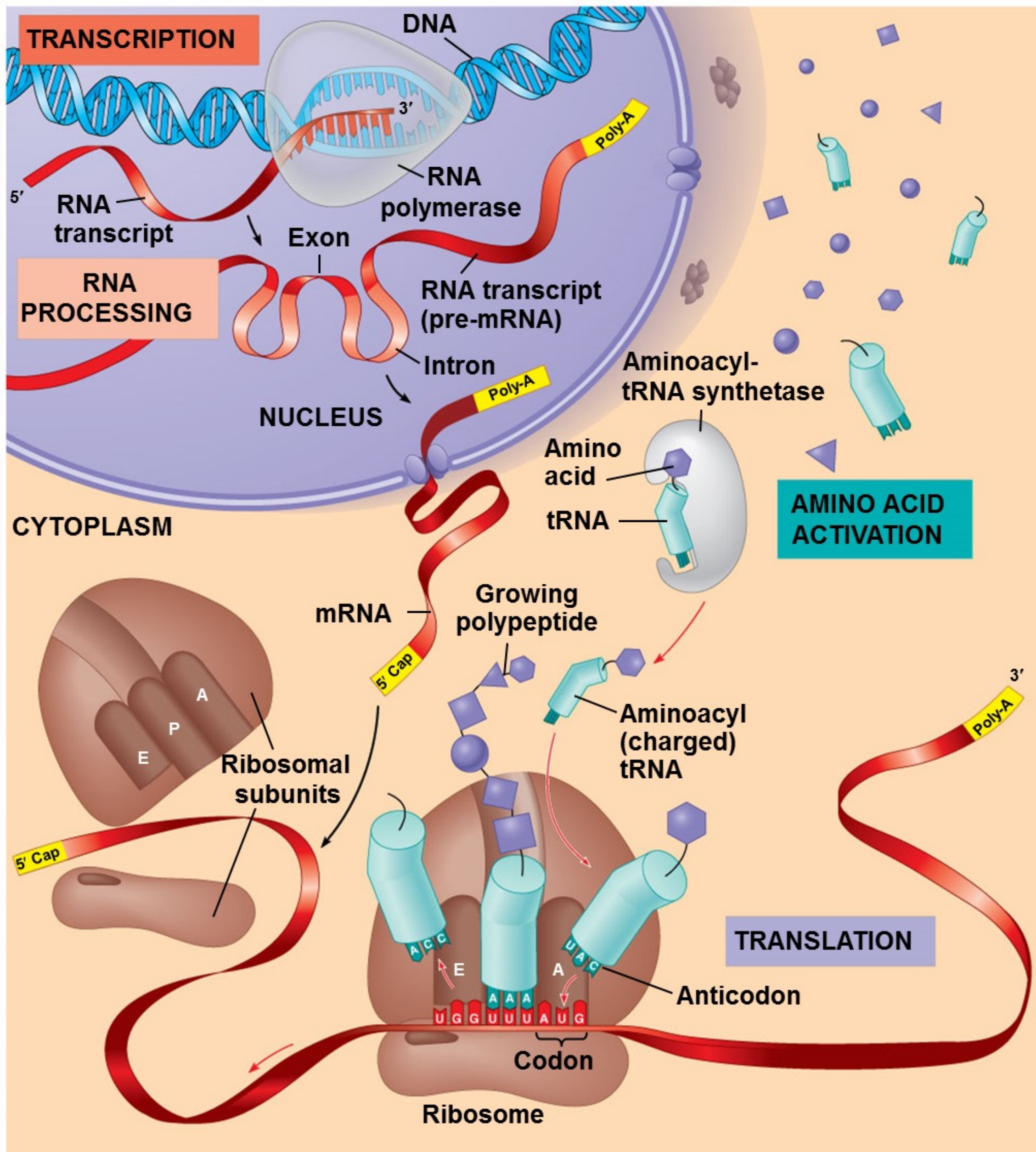
The "central dogma"



The molecular machinery of terrestrial life

Exons:
coding DNA
Introns:
non-coding DNA

mRNA:
messenger RNA
tRNA:
transfer RNA



The functioning of the molecular machinery requires the presence of nuclei acids and proteins (enzymes)

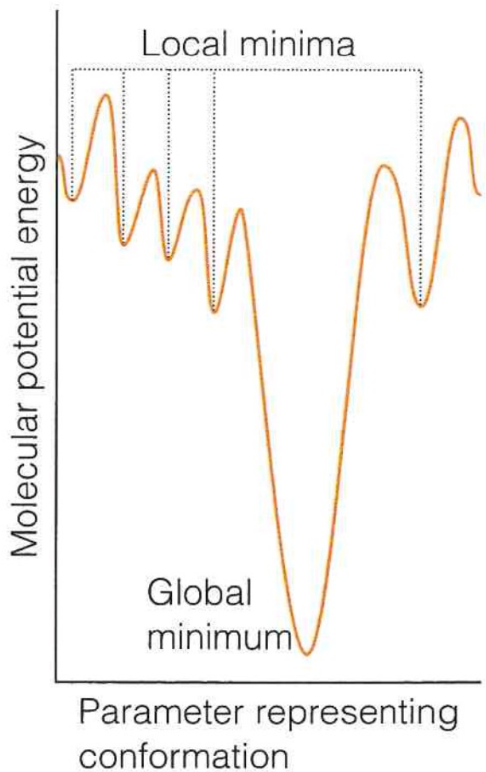
The information stored in the DNA is not sufficient, by itself, to generate an organism

Large part of the information required for the assemblage of macromolecules, organs, etc.
are implicitely contained in the laws of physics and chemistry

Example: folding of proteins

Protein folding

Spontaneous formation of geometrical configurations with lowest potential energy



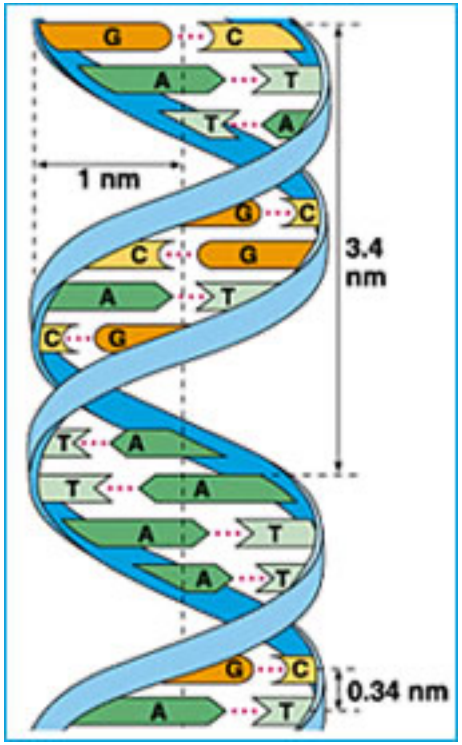
Molecular mechanics simulations

A plot of potential energy againts the molecular geometry often shows several local minima and a global minimum

Atkins & De Paula, Physical Chemistry for Life Sciences, 2011, p. 451

Appendix:
the DNA as a digital storage device

- The density of information (MB/unit volume) stored in the DNA can be calculated as follows
- The radius of the helix is $r_h \sim 1$ nm, while the perpendicular distance between adjacent nucleobasis $d_n \sim 0.34$ nm
- The volume occupied by a codon (3 nucleobasis) is therefore $V_{codon} \cong 3\, d_n\, \pi\, r_h^2 \cong 3.2\ \text{nm}^3$
- Each codon has 6 bits of information (64 combinations=2^6), corresponding to 0.75 bytes
- The density of information is therefore
  $0.75\ \text{B}/(3.2\ \text{nm}^3) = 0.23\ \text{B/nm}^3 = 2.3\text{x}10^5\ \text{TB/mm}^3$
- This is the maximum density of information that can be obtained by compactified DNA strands



- Exercise: check that this density of information is largest than that of present-day storage devices by several orders of magnitude