# Specific Heat Capacity* & Calorimetry†

**Unit:** Thermal Physics (Heat)

**NGSS Standards/MA Curriculum Frameworks (2016):** HS-PS3-1, HS-PS4-3a

**AP® Physics 2 Learning Objectives/Essential Knowledge (2024):** 9.5.A, 9.5.A.1, 9.5.A.2

**Mastery Objective(s):** (Students will be able to…)

- Calculate the heat transferred when an object with a known specific heat capacity is heated.
- Perform calculations related to calorimetry.
- Describe what is happening at the molecular level when a system is in thermal equilibrium.

**Success Criteria:**

- Variables are correctly identified and substituted correctly into the correct equations.
- Algebra is correct and rounding to appropriate number of significant figures is reasonable.

**Language Objectives:**

- Explain what the specific heat capacity of a substance measures.
- Explain how heat is transferred between one substance and another.

**Tier 2 Vocabulary:** heat, specific heat capacity, "coffee cup" calorimeter

## Labs, Activities & Demonstrations:

- Calorimetry lab.

## Notes:

Different objects have different abilities to hold heat. For example, if you enjoy pizza, you may have noticed that the sauce holds much more heat (and burns your mouth much more readily) than the cheese or the crust.

The amount of heat that a given mass of a substance can hold is based on its specific heat capacity.

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* Physicists call this quantity "specific heat". Chemists call it "heat capacity". The term "specific heat capacity" is used so that physicists and chemists can talk to one another and realize that they are discussing the same concept.

† Calorimetry is usually taught in chemistry. However, the topic was moved from chemistry to physics in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks starting in 2016.

specific heat capacity (*C*): a measure of the amount of heat required per gram of a substance to produce a specific temperature change in the substance.

$C_p$: specific heat capacity, measured at constant pressure. For gases, this means the measurement was taken while allowing the gas to expand as it was heated.

$C_v$: specific heat capacity, measured at constant volume. For gases, this means the measurement was made in a sealed container, allowing the pressure to rise as the gas was heated.

For solids and liquids, $C_p \approx C_v$ because the pressure and volume change very little with heating. For gases, $C_p > C_v$ (always). For ideal gases, $C_p - C_v = R$, where *R* is a constant known as "the gas constant."

When there is a choice, $C_p$ is more commonly used than $C_v$ because it is easier to measure. When dealing with solids and liquids, most physicists just use C for specific heat capacity and don't worry about the distinction.

## Calculating Heat from a Temperature Change

The amount of heat gained or lost when an object changes temperature is given by the equation:

$$Q = mC\Delta T = m\int_{T_1}^{T_2} C(T)dT$$

where:

$\quad Q$ = heat (J or kJ)

$\quad m$ = mass (g or kg)

$\quad C$ = specific heat capacity (usually $\frac{kJ}{kg \cdot K} \equiv \frac{J}{g \cdot K}$ )

$\quad C(T)$ = specific heat capacity as a function of temperature

$\quad \Delta T$ = temperature change (K or °C)[*]

Because problems involving heat often involve large amounts of energy, heat is often expressed in kilojoules (kJ) rather than joules.

Note that $1\frac{kJ}{kg \cdot K} \equiv 1\frac{kJ}{kg \cdot °C} \equiv 1\frac{J}{g \cdot °C}$   and   $1\frac{cal}{g \cdot °C} \equiv 1\frac{kcal}{kg \cdot °C} = 4.18\frac{J}{g \cdot °C} = 4.18\frac{kJ}{kg \cdot K}$

You need to be careful with the units. If the mass is given in kilograms (kg), your specific heat capacity will have units of $\frac{kJ}{kg \cdot °C}$ and the heat energy will come out in kilojoules (kJ). If mass is given in grams, you will use units of $\frac{J}{g \cdot °C}$ and the heat energy will come out in joules (J).

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[*] Because 1 K is the same size as 1 °C, the two units are equivalent for *ΔT* values. Note, however, that *T* in equations must be in kelvin, because a temperature of 0 in an equation must mean absolute zero.

**Specific Heat Capacities of Some Substances**

| Substance | Specific Heat Capacity ($\frac{kJ}{kg \cdot K}$) | Substance | Specific Heat Capacity ($\frac{kJ}{kg \cdot K}$) |
|---|---|---|---|
| water at 20 °C | 4.181 | aluminum | 0.897 |
| ethylene glycol (anti-freeze) | 2.460 | glass | 0.84 |
| | | iron | 0.450 |
| ice at −10 °C | 2.080 | copper | 0.385 |
| steam at 100 °C | 2.11 | brass | 0.380 |
| steam at 130 °C | 1.99 | silver | 0.233 |
| vegetable oil | 2.00 | lead | 0.160 |
| air | 1.012 | gold | 0.129 |

# Calorimetry

calorimetry:  the measurement of heat flow

In a calorimetry experiment, heat flow is calculated by measuring the mass and temperature change of an object and applying the specific heat capacity equation.

calorimeter:  an insulated container for performing calorimetry experiments.

coffee cup calorimeter:  a calorimeter that is only an insulated container—it does not include a thermal mass (such as a mass of water).  It is usually made of Styrofoam, and often resembles a coffee cup.

bomb calorimeter:  a calorimeter for measuring the heat produced by a chemical reaction.  A bomb calorimeter is a double-walled metal container with water between the layers of metal.  The heat from the chemical reaction causes the temperature of the water to increase.  Because the mass and specific heat capacity of the calorimeter (water plus metal) are known, the heat produced by the reaction can be calculated from the increase in temperature of the water.

It has a great name, but a bomb calorimeter doesn't involve actually blowing anything up.  ☺

## Solving Coffee Cup Calorimetry Problems

Most coffee cup calorimetry problems involve placing a hot object in contact with a colder one. Many of them involve placing a hot piece of metal into cold water.

To solve the problems, assume that both objects end up at the same temperature.

If we decide that heat gained (going into a substance) by each object that is getting hotter is positive, and heat lost (coming out of a substance) by every substance that is getting colder is negative, then the basic equation is:

$$\text{Heat Lost} + \text{Heat Gained} = \text{Change in Thermal Energy}$$
$$\sum Q_{lost} + \sum Q_{gained} = \Delta Q$$

If the calorimeter is insulated, then no heat is gained or lost by the entire system, which means $\Delta Q = 0$. This is often represented as $-\sum Q_{lost} = \sum Q_{gained}$

If we have two substances (#1 and #2), one of which is getting hotter and the other of which is getting colder, then our equation becomes:

$$\text{Heat Lost} + \text{Heat Gained} = \text{Change in Thermal Energy}$$
$$\sum Q_{lost} + \sum Q_{gained} = \Delta Q = 0$$
$$m_1 C_1 \Delta T_1 + m_2 C_2 \Delta T_2 = 0$$

In this example, $\Delta T_1$ would be negative and $\Delta T_2$ would be positive.

To solve a calorimetry problem, there are six quantities that you need: the two masses, the two specific heat capacities, and the two temperature changes. (You might be given initial and final temperatures for either or both, in which case you'll need to subtract. Remember that if the temperature increases, $\Delta T$ is positive, and if the temperature decreases, $\Delta T$ is negative.) The problem will usually give you all but one of these and you will need to find the missing one.

If you need to find the final temperature, use $\Delta T = T_f - T_i$ on each side. You will have both $T_i$ numbers, so the only variable left will be $T_f$. (The algebra is straightforward, but ugly.)

## Sample Problems:

Q: An 0.050 kg block of aluminum is heated and placed in a calorimeter containing 0.100 kg of water at 20. °C. If the final temperature of the water was 30. °C, to what temperature was the aluminum heated?

A: To solve the problem, we need to look up the specific heat capacities for aluminum and water in *Table K. Thermal Properties of Selected Materials* on page 473 of your Physics Reference Tables. The specific heat capacity of aluminum is $0.898 \frac{J}{g \cdot °C}$, and the specific heat capacity for water is $4.181 \frac{J}{g \cdot °C}$.

We also need to realize that we are looking for the initial temperature of the aluminum. $\Delta T$ is always ***final – initial***, which means $\Delta T_{Al} = 30 - T_{i,Al}$. (Because the aluminum starts out at a higher temperature, this will give us a negative number, which is what we want.)

$$m_{Al} C_{Al} \Delta T_{Al} + m_w C_w \Delta T_w = 0$$
$$(0.050)(0.897)(30 - T_i) + (0.100)(4.181)(30 - 20) = 0$$
$$0.0449(30 - T_i) + 4.181 = 0$$
$$1.3455 - 0.0449 T_i + 4.181 = 0$$
$$5.5265 = 0.0449 T_i$$
$$T_i = \frac{5.5265}{0.0449} = 123.2 \, °C$$

Q: An 0.025 kg block of copper at 95°C is dropped into a calorimeter containing 0.075 kg of water at 25°C. What is the final temperature?

A: We solve this problem the same way. The specific heat capacity for copper is $0.385 \frac{J}{g \cdot °C}$, and $\Delta T_{Cu} = T_f - 95$ and $\Delta T_w = T_f - 25$. This means $T_f$ will appear in two places. The algebra will be even uglier, but it's still a straightforward Algebra 1 problem:

$$m_{Cu} C_{Cu} \Delta T_{Cu} + m_w C_w \Delta T_w = 0$$
$$(0.025)(0.385)(T_f - 95_i) + (0.075)(4.181)(T_f - 25) = 0$$
$$0.009625(T_f - 95) + 0.3138(T_f - 25) = 0$$
$$0.009625 T_f - (0.009625)(95) + 0.3136 T_f - (0.3138)(25) = 0$$
$$0.009625 T_f - 0.9144 + 0.3138 T_f - 7.845 = 0$$
$$0.3234 T_f = 8.759$$
$$T_f = \frac{8.759}{0.3234} = 27 \, °C$$

## Homework Problems

You will need to look up specific heat capacities in *Table K. Thermal Properties of Selected Materials* on page 473 of your Physics Reference Tables.

1. **(S)** 375 kJ of heat is added to a 25.0 kg granite rock. If the temperature increases by 19.0 °C, what is the specific heat capacity of granite?

   Answer: $0.790 \frac{kJ}{kg \cdot °C}$

2. **(M)** A 0.040 kg block of copper at 95 °C is placed in 0.105 kg of water at an unknown temperature. After equilibrium is reached, the final temperature is 24 °C. What was the initial temperature of the water?

   Answer: 21.5 °C

3. **(S)** A sample of metal with a specific heat capacity of $0.50 \frac{kJ}{kg \cdot °C}$ is heated to 98 °C and then placed in an 0.055 kg sample of water at 22 °C. When equilibrium is reached, the final temperature is 35 °C. What was the mass of the metal?

   Answer: 0.0948 kg

4.  **(S)** A 0.280 kg sample of a metal with a specific heat capacity of $0.430\frac{kJ}{kg\cdot°C}$ is heated to 97.5 °C then placed in an 0.0452 kg sample of water at 31.2 °C. What is the final temperature of the metal and the water?

    Answer: 57 °C

5.  **(M)** A sample of metal with mass $m$ is heated to a temperature of $T_m$ and placed into a mass of water $M$ with temperature $T_w$. Once the system reaches equilibrium, the temperature of the water is $T_f$. Derive an expression for the specific heat capacity of the metal, $C_m$.

    Answer: $C_m = \dfrac{MC_w(T_f - T_w)}{m(T_m - T_f)}$

6.  **(A)** You want to do an experiment to measure the conversion of gravitational potential energy to kinetic energy to heat by dropping 2.0 kg of copper off the roof of LEHS, a height of 14 m. How much will the temperature of the copper increase?
    (*Hint: Remember that potential energy is measured in* J *but specific heat capacity problems usually use* kJ.)

    Answer: 0.36°C