

5.9 When the First Step Is Fast

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Total: 10 marks

KEY WORDS intermediate

• rate law

• activation energy

• rate-determining step

Objective

Build the skills to answer exam questions on mechanisms with a **fast first step** (a pre-equilibrium).

You must be able to:

- recognise when the slow step contains an **intermediate**
- substitute for the intermediate using the fast pre-equilibrium
- write a rate law with only reactants

1 Key knowledge and worked examples

Study these first. Each one shows the method for a question type used later – follow the steps and you can do the Practice and Exam-style questions yourself.

■ The problem

If the **first** step is fast and reversible and the **second** (slow) step uses an **intermediate**, the raw rate law would contain that intermediate – which is not allowed.

■ Pre-equilibrium substitution

The fast first step reaches equilibrium: forward rate = reverse rate. Solve that equality for the intermediate's concentration, then substitute it into the slow step's rate law.

■ A worked outline

Step 1 (fast) $2\text{NO} \rightleftharpoons \text{N}_2\text{O}_2$; Step 2 (slow) $\text{N}_2\text{O}_2 + \text{O}_2 \rightarrow 2\text{NO}_2$. Slow-step rate = $k[\text{N}_2\text{O}_2][\text{O}_2]$. From step 1's equilibrium, $[\text{N}_2\text{O}_2] \propto [\text{NO}]^2$, so

$$\text{rate} = k'[\text{NO}]^2[\text{O}_2].$$

■ The result

The final rate law has only reactants (NO and O₂) – the intermediate has been replaced.

2 Practice

Now apply the methods above.

2.1 Why can't an intermediate stay in the final rate law? [1]

2.2 In a fast equilibrium, the forward rate equals the ____ rate. [1]

2.3 If $[\text{N}_2\text{O}_2] \propto [\text{NO}]^2$, and $\text{rate} = k[\text{N}_2\text{O}_2][\text{O}_2]$, write the rate in terms of reactants. [2]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 When the slow step contains an intermediate, you replace it using the [1]

- ☐ **A** overall equation
B fast pre-equilibrium step
C products
D activation energy

3.2 Mechanism: Step 1 (fast) $\text{A} \rightleftharpoons \text{B}$ with $[\text{B}] \propto [\text{A}]$; Step 2 (slow) $\text{B} + \text{C} \rightarrow \text{D}$.

(a) Write the slow-step rate law. [1]

(b) Substitute for the intermediate to give the overall rate law. [2]

3.3 Explain why a fast reversible first step is called a “pre-equilibrium”. [2]