

CONFUSING ELEMENT SYMBOLS EXPLAINED

Most of the chemical symbols for elements in the periodic table make perfect sense; there are a small selection, however, that seem to bear no relation to their element's name. Here's a look at these rogue symbols, along with explanations of the reasons behind them.

GRAPHIC KEY		SODIUM – NATRIUM		POTASSIUM – KALIUM		IRON – FERRUM	
<p>11</p> <p>Na</p>	ELEMENT ATOMIC NO.	11	Arabic – <i>natrun</i>	19	Arabic – <i>al qaliy</i>	26	Latin – <i>ferrum</i>
	ELEMENT NAMES	Sodium's Latin name, 'natrium', derives from the Greek 'nitron' (a name for sodium carbonate). Its original source is likely to be the Arabic work 'natrun'. A number of modern languages still call the element natrium instead of sodium.		'Kalium' is potassium's Latin name, and derives from the Arabic 'al qaliy', meaning "calcined ashes" (the ashes left over when plant material is burned). As with sodium, a number of modern languages still refer to potassium as kalium.		Iron's Latin name, 'ferrum', simply means 'iron' or 'sword', and is possibly of Semitic origin. The element is known by a myriad of various names in different languages, with some sources suggesting there are over 200 different names for it.	
	Source of symbol's name						
	ELEMENT SYMBOL						
COPPER – CUPRUM		SILVER – ARGENTUM		TIN – STANNUM		ANTIMONY – STIBIUM	
29	Cu	47	Ag	50	Sn	51	Sb
Greek – <i>kypros</i>		Latin – <i>argentum</i>		Latin – <i>stannum/stagnum</i>		Greek – <i>stibi</i>	
Copper's Latin name was 'cuprium', which itself comes from 'kypros', which is the Greek name for Cyprus. The island of Cyprus was famous centuries ago for its copper reserves. The name was eventually simplified to 'cuprum'.		The Latin name for silver, 'argentum', is thought to derive originally from Indo-European, likely referring to the metal's shininess. The country Argentina is named after silver, and is the only country to be named after a chemical element.		Tin's Latin name, 'stannum', may be derived from the Indo-European 'stag' (dripping) because tin melts at a low temperature. There's also speculation it could be derived from the Cornish 'steañ' due to Cornwall's famous tin mines.		The Latin 'stibium' derives from the Greek word 'stibi', meaning eye paint, referring to antimony's use as an ancient eye cosmetic. This is in turn likely derived from Arabic or Egyptian. Few countries refer to antimony as stibium today.	
TUNGSTEN – WOLFRAM		GOLD – AURUM		MERCURY – HYDRARGYRUM		LEAD – PLUMBUM	
74	W	79	Au	80	Hg	82	Pb
German – <i>wolf rahm</i>		Latin – <i>aurum</i>		Greek – <i>hydrargyros</i>		Latin – <i>plumbum</i>	
Wolfram was named after the mineral it was found in, wolframite. This is from the German 'wolf rahm', or 'wolf's foam', referring to the amount of tin 'eaten' by the metal during its extraction. Wolfram is still used in several languages.		The Latin name for gold was 'aurum', meaning 'yellow', derived from the word 'aurora' ('dawn'). The name 'gold', used in Germanic languages, means 'yellow, shining metal'; many other European languages use derivatives of aurum.		Mercury's original Latin name was actually 'argentum vivum' (living silver), but Latin later borrowed from the Greek 'hydrargyros' (liquid silver) to give 'hydrargyrum'. The original English name for the element was 'quicksilver'.		Lead's Latin name, 'plumbum', likely originally derives from a language pre-dating Ancient Greek. This Latin name is also the source of the English words 'plumbing' and 'plumber', due to the historic use of lead in water pipes.	

