

Electron configuration diagrams

An electron configuration diagram is a model that depicts the position of electrons as they orbit the nucleus of an atom. Electrons are represented by dots or crosses and are positioned in energy levels, or 'shells', around the central nucleus. This is sometimes called the Bohr, or the 'solar system', model.

In the Bohr model, there are a few guidelines that will help you draw accurate diagrams.

- **Electrons** must occupy the lowest available shell, closest to the nucleus.
- The maximum number of electrons that can fill each **shell** is:
 - **two in the first shell,**
 - **eight in the second shell,**
 - **eight in the third shell.**
- **Calcium**, the 20th element, has two further electrons that go in the **fourth shell**.

In the **shorthand notation** for electron configuration, the number of electrons in each shell can be written rather than drawn. Each shell is separated by a full stop or a comma. For nitrogen this would be 2.5 or 2,5 and for calcium this would be 2.8.8.2 or 2,8,8,2.

Niels Bohr

The idea that electrons orbit the atom in fixed shells, or **energy levels**, was first suggested by Niels Bohr in 1913. Bohr observed that bursts of energy emitted from hydrogen atoms, visible as **light**, only occurred at specific **wavelengths**. He suggested this was due to electrons **moving between energy levels** rather than being scattered randomly around the nucleus. He was awarded a Nobel prize for his work.

Did you know ...?

Bohr impressed fellow scientist **Rutherford**, who **discovered the nucleus** of the atom, but didn't win over **JJ Thomson** whose '**plum pudding**' model of the atom was replaced by Rutherford's, then Bohr's, model.

Download this

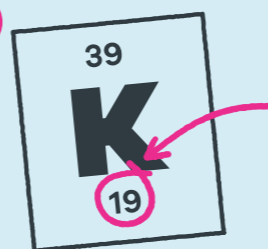
Poster, fact sheet and worksheet from the EIC website: rsc.li/3BufhiG



How to draw an electron configuration diagram

Use these steps to draw electron configuration diagrams for the first 20 elements in the periodic table.

1



Find the element on the periodic table. The **atomic number** tells you how many electrons to draw in total. For example, **potassium has 19 electrons**.

2



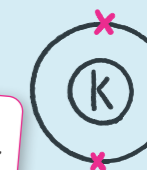
Draw a small circle and write the symbol in the centre. This represents the nucleus.

3



Draw a circle around the nucleus. This is the first electron shell.

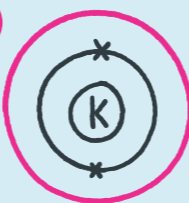
4



TIP: USE A PENCIL TO DRAW THE SHELLS AND ELECTRONS. YOU MIGHT DECIDE TO REPOSITION THEM LATER.

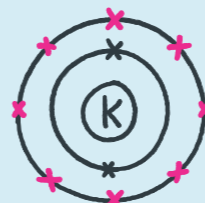
Add up to two electrons to the first electron shell. Electrons are usually represented by a dot or cross.

5



Draw another circle around the first shell. This is the second shell.

6



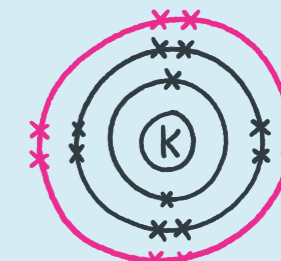
Add up to eight electrons to the second shell.

7



Draw another circle around the second electron shell. This is the third shell.

8



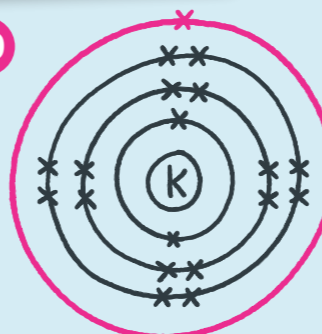
Add up to eight electrons to the third shell.

9



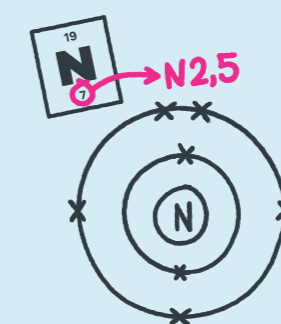
Draw the last circle around the third shell. This is the fourth electron shell.

10



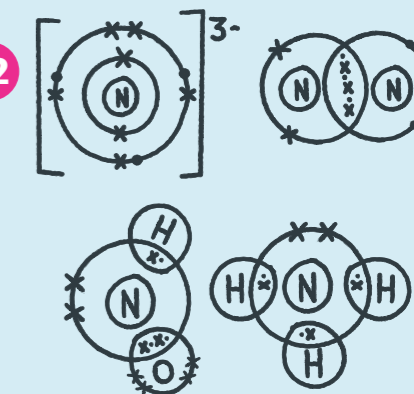
Add up to two electrons to the fourth electron shell. For potassium, only one electron is added to this shell.

11



Use these steps to draw electron configuration diagrams of the first 20 elements.

12



The position of the electrons may depend on what you need to draw next.

The arrangement of an element's electrons tells you where it is on the **periodic table**. The **number of shells** shows which **period**, or row, it's in and the **number of electrons in the outer shell** shows which **group** it's in.