

# Alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone

## The Wizarding World Meets the Real World (But Not Really)



*Harry Potter* was released in the United Kingdom under the title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The title was changed to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* for the US market because—and rightly so—the publisher figured that most Americans wouldn't get “philosopher's stone.” But the original title was actually far more appropriate, and here's why.

Throughout history, kings, queens, and, well, anyone who was anyone deeply desired the philosopher's stone. Legends said that with the philosopher's stone, you could make two things that pretty much everyone wants: endless money and to live forever.

Alchemy, the practice of making or finding the philosopher's stone, was the ancestor of modern-day chemistry. Alchemy was a mix of chemistry and sorcery, so it wasn't a true science by today's standards. But sorcery, ghosts, and demons were as real to people 200 years ago as DNA is to us today. And unlike modern science, alchemy was shrouded in secrets and mystery.

People who practiced alchemy were called alchemists and they all sought the philosopher's stone. This legendary stone was not really a rock—or maybe it was a rock that you ground up into a powder—but a substance that could be used to do two things. The first was change ordinary metals into gold; whoever had the philosopher's stone could have unimaginable riches. The second was to make a drink called the “elixir of life,” which could make you live forever.

Alchemists based their science on the idea that the world is made up of four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Modern science tells us that the world is made up of elements, too (and atoms).

Alchemists worked in labs that were very similar Harry Potter's Potions classes. The alchemists mixed different—and often weird—

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things together and recited spells. They hoped these brews would magically form into the philosopher's stone. None ever did, as you can imagine.

What's interesting is that through modern chemistry, you can actually combine certain elements to create gold. Unfortunately, it costs much more to make gold than to buy it. So it's not worth the effort.

Modern chemistry and science also can help people live longer lives. As science advances, it could help people live to be 120 or even 150 years old. Most believe that such a long life will be possible through a mix of healthy living and gene therapy. Some scientists even believe that these scientific advances could happen within your lifetime. But don't tell You-Know-Who.

