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## The evolution of RNA structural probing methods: From gels to next-generation sequencing

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Valérie Vivet-Boudou

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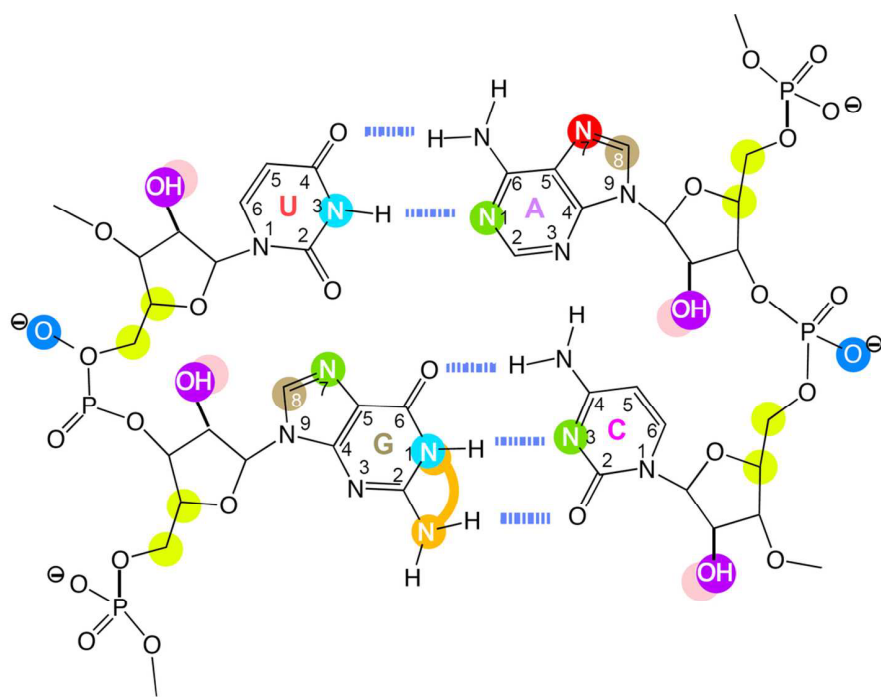
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**The evolution of RNA structural probing methods: from gels to next generation sequencing**

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- | Base-specific probes                     |  | Sugar-phosphate targeting probes         |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| <span style="color: green;">●</span> DMS | <span style="color: orange;">●</span> Kethoxal | <span style="color: blue;">●</span> ENU  | <span style="color: yellow;">●</span> OH*          |
| <span style="color: cyan;">●</span> CMCT | <span style="color: red;">●</span> DEPC        | <span style="color: brown;">●</span> NAz | <span style="color: pink;">●</span> Pb(II)         |
|  |  |  | <span style="color: purple;">●</span> SHAPE probes |

## Graphical abstract: RNA structural probing

RNA structural probing  
106x107mm (300 x 300 DPI)



**Article Title: The evolution of RNA structural probing methods: from gels to next generation sequencing**

**By: Elodie Mailler, Jean-Christophe Paillart, Roland Marquet, Redmond P Smyth\* and Valerie Vivet-Boudou\***

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#### 10 **ABSTRACT**

11 RNA molecules are important players in all domains of life and the study of the relationship between  
12 their multiple flexible states and the associated biological roles has increased in recent years. For  
13 several decades, chemical and enzymatic structural probing experiments have been used to  
14 determine RNA structure. During this time, there has been a steady improvement in probing  
15 reagents and experimental methods, and today the structural biologist community has a large range  
16 of tools at its disposal to probe the secondary structure of RNAs in vitro and in cells. Early  
17 experiments used radioactive labelling and polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis as read-out methods.  
18 This was superseded by capillary electrophoresis, and more recently by next generation sequencing.  
19 Today, powerful structural probing methods can characterize RNA structure on a genome wide scale.  
20 In this review, we will provide an overview of RNA structural probing methodologies from a  
21 historical and technical perspective.  
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## INTRODUCTION

RNA is a dynamic molecule that can fold into a variety of structures depending on alternative intramolecular base-pairings that are highly dependent on environmental factors (such as presence of biological macromolecules, chemical modifications to RNA, pH, osmolarity or temperature). RNA structure is organized hierarchically, with multiple structural motifs such as hairpins, mismatches, bulges, internal loops, pseudoknots or junctions (**Figure 1**) that together build the tertiary structure (Cruz & Westhof, 2009). Among the functions of RNA structures, the enzymatic activity of ribozymes is probably the most known. These RNAs adopt specific well-folded structures to catalyze self- or trans- RNA cleavage as well as splicing. Riboswitches are another class of RNA with function related to their structure. Upon fixation of a ligand or in response to environmental conditions, they affect gene expression by sequestering or releasing RNA motifs (Serganov & Patel, 2007). But it is now admitted that structures in mRNAs or long non-coding RNAs also play important regulatory roles. The awareness that RNA plays a key role in gene regulation (Morris & Mattick, 2014) has led to an explosion of interest in studying RNA secondary structure and its higher-order tertiary conformation (Mortimer, Kidwell, & Doudna, 2014).

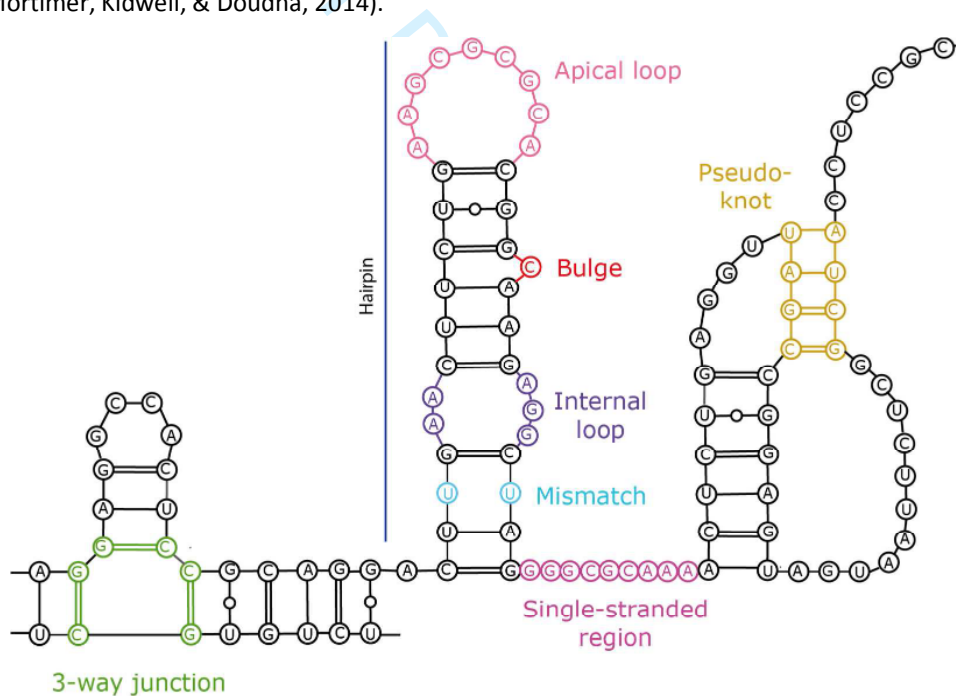


Figure 1: **Schematic representation of RNA structural motifs.** The main folding motifs are highlighted: three-way junction (green), mismatch (light blue), internal loop (purple), bulge (red), apical loop (pink), single-stranded region (dark pink) and pseudoknot (gold).

RNA secondary structure can be predicted *in silico* using phylogenetic approaches where the alignment of a large number of orthologous RNA sequences allows the prediction of base pairs and structure of large RNAs (Gutell, 1993; Juan & Wilson, 1999; Michel et al., 2000; Michel & Westhof, 1990; Schroeder, 2009; Tahiri, Tran, & Boucheham, 2017). When sufficient phylogenetic data are unavailable, the thermodynamically most stable RNA structure can be *de novo* predicted using *in*

*in silico* free-energy minimization approaches (Lorenz et al., 2011; Reuter & Mathews, 2010; Zuker, 2003). These *in silico* approaches can even explicitly model the kinetics of RNA folding during transcription (Anderson et al., 2013; Proctor & Meyer, 2013; Zhao, Zhang, & Chen, 2011). Whilst *in silico* predictions can be quite accurate for small and stable RNA domains (Miao et al., 2017, 2015), their accuracy rapidly decreases with increasing RNA length, meaning that the structures of biologically important RNA molecules, such as long non-coding RNAs (Somarowthu et al., 2015) or viral genomes (Mauger et al., 2015; Watts et al., 2009) may be poorly predicted without experimental data. Biophysical techniques such as Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) (Keane et al., 2015; Kharytonchuk et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2011), X-ray crystallography (Ennifar et al., 2001; Masquida, Sauter, & Westhof, 1999), small-angle X-ray scattering (SAXS) (Doniach & Lipfert, 2009; Fang et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014) and more recently cryo-electron microscopy (Amunts et al., 2014; Greber et al., 2014; Hang et al., 2015; Natchiar et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2015) can be used to study RNA structures. Some of these biophysical methods can reach atomic (or near atomic) resolution but come with significant drawbacks. NMR can only be applied to the study of rather small RNA motifs (up to 100 nts) and is highly restricted by buffer composition, so it cannot be performed under physiological conditions. X-ray crystallography can determine at atomic level the structure of RNAs, but has difficulty resolving the structure of non-compact RNAs or unstructured and flexible RNA regions. Cryo-electron microscopy is a promising and rapidly evolving structural approach. It has seen some success with large RNA domains, but is still limited to large structures and, most often, moderate resolution. SAXS can be used with relatively large molecules, but only provides low information on global structure. Furthermore, the aforementioned techniques cannot assess the influence of the cellular environment onto the RNA structure (Tyrrell et al., 2013). **Table 1** summarizes the main advantages and drawbacks of these techniques.

	<b>Advantage</b>	<b>Drawback</b>
<b>Phylogeny</b>	Large RNAs Highly reliable	Large number of orthologous sequences needed
<b><i>In Silico de novo</i> prediction</b>	No need of extensive sequence information	Accurate only for small and stable RNA domains Only 70% of known base-pairs predicted in the lowest free-energy structure
<b>NMR</b>	Atomic resolution	Only for small RNA motifs Restrictions on the buffer composition Influence of environment cannot be assessed
<b>X-ray</b>	Atomic resolution	Difficult to resolve non-compact, unstructured and flexible regions Influence of environment cannot be assessed
<b>Cryo-EM</b>	Large RNAs	Still moderate resolution Limited to large structures Influence of environment cannot be assessed
<b>SAXS</b>	Large RNAs	Low information on global structure Influence of environment cannot be assessed

**Table 1: Main advantages and drawbacks of *in silico* and biophysical techniques used to study RNA structures.**

RNA structural probing is an experimental approach that can be used to resolve the secondary structure of a wide variety of RNAs with high accuracy and in different environments (Burlacu et al., 2017; Chea & Jones, 2018; Incarnato et al., 2017; Jayaraman & Kenyon, 2018; Rausch,

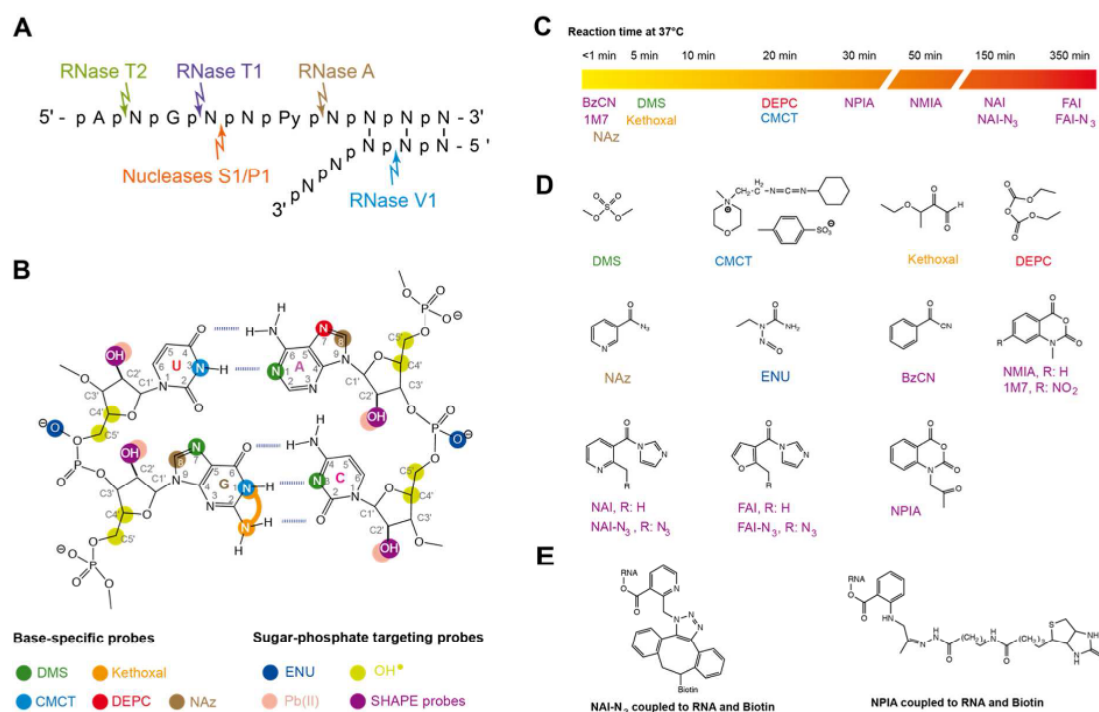
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3 Sztuba-Solinska, & Grice, 2017; Watters et al., 2018). The basis of this class of techniques is the use  
4 of enzymatic or chemical structural probes that react differently with single-stranded or double-  
5 stranded RNAs. The first generation of probing methods was developed 35-40 years ago (Ehresmann  
6 et al., 1987) but remained restricted to *in vitro* and *in vivo* analysis of short regions of RNA, as it used  
7 gel electrophoresis to resolve the sites interrogated by the structural probes. A first improvement  
8 was the replacement of gel electrophoresis with capillary electrophoresis using fluorescently labeled  
9 nucleic acids (Wilkinson et al., 2008). This allowed the analysis of longer RNA regions and facilitated  
10 the recovery of quantitative data. A few years ago, further progress was achieved through the  
11 coupling of probing methods and high-throughput sequencing technology. These “high-throughput”  
12 approaches are powerful enough to study RNA structure genome-wide and to characterize  
13 thousands of RNA structures in a single experiment (Ding et al., 2014; Rouskin et al., 2014;  
14 Underwood et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2012). Since RNA structure modulates RNA processing,  
15 localization, translation, and decay, these next generation tools allow biologists to address new  
16 questions concerning RNA structure / function relationships that were unthinkable 10 years ago.  
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22 In this review, we will first address the classical experimental methodologies for RNA  
23 structure determination along with a brief presentation of the different structural probes. We will  
24 then discuss technical aspects of how experimental data is obtained. Finally, we will discuss sources  
25 of potential bias, as well as challenges associated with the computational analysis of RNA structural  
26 probing data.  
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## 30 RNA PROBING REAGENTS

31 Enzymatic and chemical probes are used to assess RNA structure. Nucleotide accessibility or  
32 reactivity to these probes indicates their propensity to be in a paired or unpaired state and can be  
33 determined using a variety of readout methods. When designing an RNA structural probing  
34 experiment, an important consideration is the choice of the probe(s), as each class of probe has a  
35 different reactivity towards RNA. The target positions of enzymatic and chemical probes are  
36 illustrated in **Figure 2** and discussed in the following section.  
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**Figure 2: RNA probing reagents.** **A.** Common enzymatic probes with their cleavage site on single-stranded (left) or double-stranded (right) RNA. The p indicates the phosphate group (terminal or linkage), A is for Adenosine, G for Guanosine, Py for Pyrimidine nucleosides and N for any nucleoside. The arrow indicates the cleavage site and the nature of the obtained fragment (3' or 5' phosphate). **B.** Target position of chemical probes. Hydroxyl radicals are generally generated by Fenton reagents (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, Fe(EDTA) and sodium ascorbate) and Pb(II) is from lead acetate. The hydrogen bonds are drawn to illustrate the Watson-Crick face of the bases but do not indicate that the nucleotides are paired. **C.** Reaction time scale for the main chemical probes reported in the literature. These values are dependent on probe concentration and reaction temperature. For SHAPE probes, the reaction time corresponds to 5x the half-life. **D.** Chemical structure of the probes. **E.** Structure of the chemical probes of the SHAPE family designed to perform a streptavidin selection once they have been coupled to RNA and biotin.

### Enzymatic probes

Several nucleases are commonly used to probe RNA in a wide range of physiological buffers with different structural specificities. RNase V1 cleaves double-stranded or structured regions within RNAs without base specificity and generates fragments with a 5'-phosphate. Nucleases S1 and P1 are zinc-dependent endonucleases that cut RNA in single-stranded regions regardless of the identity of the base moiety, leading to 5'-phosphate RNA fragments. RNase T1 and T2 cleave specifically the bond adjacent to the 3'-phosphate of unpaired guanosine (T1) or preferentially the bond adjacent to unpaired adenosine (T2) with formation of a 3'-phosphate RNA fragment. RNase A cleavage also results in the formation of a 3'-phosphate fragment but this enzyme is specific for pyrimidine residues (**Figure 2 A**). Other more exotic nucleases such as *Neurospora crassa* or RNases U2 and Cl3 have also been exploited as structural probes but are less commonly used (Ehresmann et al., 1987).

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3 Due to their large size, enzymatic probes are sensitive to steric hindrance. Another limitation of the  
4 enzymatic mapping approach is that enzymes are restricted to *in vitro* applications because of their  
5 membrane-impermeable nature (Ehresmann et al., 1987).  
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## 8 9 **Chemical probes**

10 A strength of the chemical probes is their diversity. They have been developed to interrogate the  
11 Hoogsteen or Watson-Crick face of the base, as well as the sugar-phosphate backbone. The choice of  
12 a specific probe is also driven by the reaction time scale and its ability to enter living cells and quite  
13 often several chemical probes are combined to obtain an accurate RNA structure (Cordero et al.,  
14 2012; Incarnato et al., 2014; Mandiyan & Boublik, 1990; Paillart et al., 2004). A significant advantage  
15 of chemical probes is their small size, meaning that they are less sensitive to steric hindrance than  
16 enzymatic probes (**Figure 2 B-D**).  
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### 19 20 *Base-specific chemical probes*

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22 Base-specific chemical probes interrogate the Hoogsteen and/or the Watson-Crick faces of the base  
23 but have the drawback of having nucleotide specificities. For example, dimethylsulfate (DMS), which  
24 methylates N1-A, N3-C and N7-G at neutral pH, is largely used to identify unpaired adenosine and  
25 cytosine nucleotides *in vitro* and in a wide variety of organisms (Dutca, Gallagher, & Baserga, 2011;  
26 Kwok et al., 2013; Paillart et al., 2004). However, as the introduction of the methyl group is located  
27 on the Hoogsteen face of G, an additional step is needed to detect this modification (Peattie &  
28 Gilbert, 1980), and nowadays DMS is less used for guanine probing, with the noticeable exception of  
29 the detection of G-quartets (Guo & Bartel, 2016). Base specific reagents also include 1-cyclohexyl-3-  
30 (2-morpholinoethyl) carbodiimide metha-p-toluene sulfonate (CMCT), which reacts primarily with  
31 N3-U and N1-G of unpaired nucleotides under slightly basic conditions, 2-keto-3-ethoxy-  
32 butyraldehyde (kethoxal) forms an additional ring between the primary amine located on C2 and the  
33 N1 of unpaired guanines. The modification reaction is reversible but under slightly acidic conditions  
34 or in the presence of borate ions the adduct is stable. At neutral pH, diethylpyrocarbonate (DEPC)  
35 reacts specifically with N7-A and after treatment with aniline, it allows the detection of adenosine  
36 implicated in tertiary interactions (Brunel et al., 1991; Mandiyan & Boublik, 1990). The N7 position of  
37 A residues involved in helices are usually not reactive to DEPC, due to stacking, except at the helix  
38 ends (Ehresmann et al., 1987). More recently a new chemical compound, nicotinoyl azide (NAz) was  
39 developed to address the solvent accessibility of RNA inside and outside the cells (Feng et al., 2018).  
40 After light activation, this molecule reacts with purine nucleobases in a method called LASER (Light  
41 Activated Structural Examination of RNA) and allows the measurement of structural states of RNA as  
42 well as the identification of RNA-protein interactions.  
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### 50 51 *Non-base-specific chemical probes*

52 Other chemicals interrogate the sugar-phosphate backbone, with the advantage that they are not  
53 specific to an individual nucleotide. For example, ethylnitrosourea (ENU) is an alkylating reagent  
54 specific of the oxygen atoms of phosphate groups engaged neither in tertiary interactions nor in  
55 cation coordination (Schlegl et al., 1997; Vlassov, Giege, & Ebel, 1980). The alkylation results in the  
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3 formation of an unstable phosphate tri-ester, which leads to RNA cleavage under mild alkaline  
4 treatment. Hydroxyl radicals also cleave the RNA backbone after abstraction of an hydrogen atom  
5 from the C4' and/or C5' ribose position(s), providing nucleotide-level information on solvent  
6 accessibility of the nucleic acid backbone and tertiary fold of the RNA molecule (Isel et al., 1999;  
7 Tullius & Greenbaum, 2005). Until recently, hydroxyl radical probing was limited to *in vitro*  
8 applications, since radicals were generated by Fenton reagents: H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, Fe(II)-EDTA and sodium  
9 ascorbate or peroxonitrous acid (Götte et al., 1996). But this probe has been adapted to effective  
10 footprinting of RNA-protein complexes *in vivo* whereby a synchrotron X-ray beam generates  
11 hydroxyl radicals inside the cell with a 100 ms exposure (Adilakshmi, Lease, & Woodson, 2006;  
12 Adilakshmi, Soper, & Woodson, 2009). Whilst not strictly speaking a chemical probing technique, in-  
13 line probing can be used to analyse RNA structure by taking advantage of the natural ability of each  
14 nucleotide to form a 2'-3'-cyclic phosphate product leading to the cleavage of the ribose-phosphate  
15 chain. This event is mediated by the attack of the sugar 2'-OH on the adjacent phosphate di-ester  
16 (Regulski & Breaker, 2008) and occurs more frequently when the two groups are "in-line", that is  
17 when the nucleotides are flexible. However, in-line probing is not adapted to study fast RNA  
18 structure transitions since the technique takes several hours to perform cleavages in mild conditions.  
19 Therefore, metal-induced cleavages were developed to cleave flexible regions of RNA using the same  
20 mechanism, but at the minute scale (Forconi & Herschlag, 2009). The most widely used metal probe  
21 is the lead (II) ion which activates the 2'-OH of nucleotides located in single-stranded regions such as  
22 bulges and loops but also in paired regions destabilized by non-canonical interactions or distortions  
23 (Brunel et al., 1991; Ciesiołka et al., 1998).

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SHAPE (Selective 2'-Hydroxyl Acylation analysed by Primer Extension) reagents are a family  
of RNA structural probes that under slightly basic conditions react with the ribose 2'-OH of flexible  
(normally unpaired) nucleotides (McGinnis et al., 2012; Merino et al., 2005; Mortimer & Weeks,  
2007). Consequently, SHAPE probes are able to interrogate the local dynamic of the four different  
nucleotides at the same time (Deigan et al., 2009). Moreover, the increasing number of reagents  
available allows the study of various biological processes on a variety of timescales (Spitale et al.,  
2014). Indeed, 1-methyl-7-nitroisatoic anhydride (1M7) (Gherghe et al., 2008) and benzoyl cyanide  
(BzCN) (Mortimer & Weeks, 2007) quickly react with RNA and are thus well suited for the study of  
dynamic RNAs. On the other hand, N-methylisatoic anhydride (NMIA) (Gherghe et al., 2008), 2-  
methylnicotinic acid imidazolide (NAI) and 2-methyl-3-furoic acid imidazolide (FAI) (Spitale et al.,  
2013) are less sensitive to 2'-OH attack and react in a time window compatible with *in vivo* study of  
RNA structures (Spitale et al., 2013; Tyrrell et al., 2013) (**Figure 2 C-D**). The reagent half-life is an  
important experimental parameter: fast reagents are less sensitive to specific ion and buffer choices,  
and are thought to better reflect steady state RNA-structures (Mortimer & Weeks, 2007; Smola,  
Calabrese, & Weeks, 2015). However, fast reagents may not be suitable for RNA structural probing in  
cells, with one group reporting that 1M7 is unsuitable for in cell RNA structural probing due to its  
reaction rate and poor aqueous solubility (Lee et al., 2017).

## CONVENTIONAL REACTIVITY READOUT METHODS

Sites of chemical adduct formation or strand scission can be detected in several ways (**Figure 3**).  
When the probing methods involve enzymatic or chemical strand scission, RNAs end-labelled at their  
5' or 3' extremity can be used. In this case, the population of cleaved RNA fragments is sized by

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3 denaturing polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis allowing the identification of the position of  
4 cleavages on the RNA molecule by comparison with a sequencing ladder. However, this method can  
5 only be used to analyse short RNAs (<300 nucleotides) near their extremities (Ehresmann et al.,  
6 1987) (**Figure 3 A**). For probing the structure of large RNAs, primer extension by reverse  
7 transcriptase is a preferred alternative (Qu, Michot, & Bachellerie, 1983). Moreover, some chemical  
8 modifications can only be detected by primer extension, as cleavage at the modified site is not  
9 possible (Baudin et al., 1989); this is for instance the case for the SHAPE family of probes. Usually the  
10 modified RNA is hybridized with a 5'-terminal [<sup>32</sup>P]-labelled oligodeoxyribonucleotide  
11 complementary to a chosen sequence in the RNA. Since the reverse transcription reaction is blocked  
12 when the enzyme encounters an RNA-chemical adduct or a strand scission, a population of  
13 truncated radiolabelled cDNAs whose 3'-end corresponds to the nucleotide before the site of  
14 modification or to the nucleotide of the cleavage site is generated. This population is traditionally  
15 resolved by denaturing polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and detection is done by either  
16 autoradiography or phosphorimaging (**Figure 3 B**). Reactivities are mapped back to the RNA  
17 nucleotide sequence by reference to dideoxyribonucleotide sequencing reactions performed in  
18 parallel. However, cDNA synthesis is not only blocked by chemical adducts or cleavage sites but also  
19 occurs at sites with a stable RNA structure, natural modification (such as m<sup>2</sup>G or m<sup>6</sup>A) or due to RNA  
20 degradation. Thus, a negative control reaction must be conducted in parallel to the experiment.  
21 Band intensity of nucleotide fragments resolved on gel can be quantified by the semi-automated  
22 footprinting analysis (SAFA) program (Das et al., 2005). Data from the probed samples are then  
23 normalized to control data to estimate the reactivity to the structural probe. However, experimental  
24 readouts using radioactively labelled RT primers are labor-intensive and hazardous, and the  
25 resolution of polyacrylamide gels limits useful analysis to 150 nucleotides.  
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