
Analysis of *E. coli* promoter sequences

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ABSTRACT

We have compiled and analyzed 263 promoters with known transcriptional start points for *E. coli* genes. Promoter elements (-35 hexamer, -10 hexamer, and spacing between these regions) were aligned by a program which selects the arrangement consistent with the start point and statistically most homologous to a reference list of promoters. The initial reference list was that of Hawley and McClure (Nucl. Acids Res. 11, 2237-2255, 1983). Alignment of the complete list was used for reference until successive analyses did not alter the structure of the list. In the final compilation, all bases in the -35 (TTGACA) and -10 (TATAAT) hexamers were highly conserved, 92% of promoters had inter-region spacing of 17 ± 1 bp, and 75% of the uniquely defined start points initiated 7 ± 1 bases downstream of the -10 region. The consensus sequence of promoters with inter-region spacing of 16, 17, or 18 bp did not differ. This compilation and analysis should be useful for studies of promoter structure and function and for programs which identify potential promoter sequences¹.

INTRODUCTION

Promoters are DNA sequences which affect the frequency and location of transcription initiation through interaction with RNA polymerase (1,2). Two conserved regions about 35 and 10 base pairs (bp) upstream from the transcription start (-35 and -10 regions, respectively) were identified by comparison of relatively few promoters (3-6). More extensive compilations and comparisons of promoters for genes of *E. coli* and its phage and plasmids supported and extended the concept of a "consensus" promoter sequence: a -35 (TTGACA) and -10 (TATAAT) region separated by 17 bp with transcription initiating at a purine about 7 bp downstream from the 3' end of the -10 region (7-9). While the -35 and -10 regions show the greatest conservation across promoters and are also the sites of nearly all mutations which affect transcriptional strength, other bases flanking the -35 and -10 regions, in addition to the start point also occur at greater than random frequencies and sometimes affect promoter activity (9-12). In addition, variation in spacing between the -35 and -10 regions plays a role in promoter strength (13-16).

Promoter compilations and analyses have led to computer programs which

predict the location of promoter sequences on the basis of homology either to the consensus sequence or to a reference list of promoters (17-19). Such programs are of practical significance in searching new sequences (2,20); thus promoter compilations are important beyond providing data regarding promoter structure. However, current compilations are based on sequences aligned by eye in attempts to maximize homology to the consensus sequence. Unfortunately, sequences closer to the consensus sequence may be missed thus weakening the homology between promoters and consequently reducing the predictive power of algorithms. Although promoter elements can be identified by biochemical or genetic evidence that pin-point bases which interact with RNA polymerase, such data is unavailable for most genes.

We have updated the compilation of E. coli promoter sequences and have reiteratively aligned them on the basis of a computer program which finds the sequence with greatest homology to the reference set. This compilation and reanalysis of 263 promoters should be useful in studies of promoter structure and function and in promoter search algorithms.

METHODS

Promoter Compilation

The starting point for analyses described below was the Hawley and McClure (9) compilation of 112 E. coli promoters with known transcriptional start points. Three resources were used to extend and update this compilation: Index Medicus, Dialog, and the National Institutes of Health GENBANK database on the National Biomedical Research Foundation Protein Identification Resource. Following Hawley and McClure, only promoters in which a transcriptional startpoint has been identified by biochemical or genetic means are used in the analysis. We included promoters whose start points were identified by S1 nuclease mapping (21) if additional evidence such as high resolution in vitro transcript run-off size or the site of polymerase binding supported the S1 data.

Analysis

DNA sequences from about -50 to +10, with respect to known transcriptional start points for genes of E. coli and its plasmids and phage were analyzed for promoter signals by a modification of the algorithm described by Staden (19). This algorithm utilizes the frequency of all bases at each position in the conserved areas of the promoter and therefore derives near maximal information about the similarity of any test sequence to the reference set of sequences. In brief, the test sequence is analyzed in all possible alignments of promoter

elements to determine the arrangement of -35 and -10 elements which maximizes similarity to known promoters on a strictly statistical basis. Each alignment yields a "promoter homology index" (PHI) derived from the weight matrix of the reference set of promoters. The weight matrix contains log frequencies for each base at each position in the -35 and -10 hexamers and log frequencies of the occurrence of -35 and -10 hexamers separated by 15-21 base pairs. PHI for a given alignment is the sum of log frequencies taken from the weight matrix for the elements of the test sequence. Staden's algorithm has been shown to be operationally similar in prediction of promoter strength to an alternative algorithm of Mulligan et al. (18) which includes data on cumulative deviations from the consensus sequence (20). We chose Staden's algorithm because it seemed less arbitrary in assessment of homology.

Our program finds for each DNA sequence the 10 (or more) highest ranking alignments of all possible -35 and -10 hexamers with a spacing of 15-21 base pairs, and flags those consistent with the transcription start data. A promoter sequence was deemed consistent with start data when the initiation point was between 4 and 12 bases from the -10 hexamer (see Results and Discussion).

The initial weight matrix was derived from the compilation and promoter alignment of Hawley and McClure (9). Null frequencies were replaced by the reciprocal of the number of entries in the weight matrix at that point to avoid complete exclusion of certain bases in, or spacing between, the -35 and -10 regions (19). Following analysis of the new promoter compilation, the weight matrix was updated using new alignments. This process was repeated until consecutive reiterations yielded identical highest ranking promoters for each sequence. To avoid chance fixation on extreme patterns in the weight matrix, frequencies were periodically smoothed artificially by reducing the frequencies of highly "conserved" bases and increasing the frequencies of highly excluded bases. This procedure was repeated on several promoter lists, including subdivisions of all promoters with 16, 17, or 18 bp spacing between the -35 and -10 regions.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Promoter Compilation

Table 1 shows 288 *E. coli* promoters aligned by reiterative application of the modified algorithm of Staden (19) (Methods). Although most of these promoters are wild type bacterial, plasmid, or phage promoters (type "b", "p", "f", column b, respectively), some mutant promoters (type "M" or "m", column b)

are also included. Mutations which generate an entirely new promoter (type "M") are included among 263 promoters with known transcription start points used for analyses as described below. Mutants of naturally occurring promoters (type "m") are not; transcription start data are often not available for these mutants and their inclusion would bias the weight matrix for base frequencies at the non-mutated positions. The list includes 112 promoters compiled by Hawley and McClure (9), which can be identified by reference "9" in column j. Analysis of these promoters separately or together with additional E. coli promoters yielded essentially identical results.

The algorithm makes no use of previously identified -35 and -10 regions for a given promoter; it identifies the statistically best -35 and -10 regions consistent with transcription start data using the weight matrix of 263 promoters listed in Table 1. Columns (c), (d), and (e) indicate the stable alignment of -35 and -10 regions and the spacing between them. Column (f) gives the relative promoter homology index (PHI) of the selected -35 and -10 regions: this value is the sum of the appropriate weight matrix values for each base in the -35 and -10 hexamers, plus the value for their spacing, minus the unnormalized index value of the consensus sequence (TTGACA...17...TATAAT). PHI values are from a logarithmic scale and can be interpreted loosely in terms of probability: for example, PHI = 0 indicates that the promoter elements are identical to consensus sequence elements, i.e. the most probable arrangement of bases and spacing, while PHI = -2 indicates that the probability of occurrence of bases in these regions and the spacing between them is theoretically 100 times smaller than that of the consensus sequence. Such interpretations may not be justified since they assume that gap penalties and bases at each position are independent and that these are the only conserved elements in promoter structure. Interestingly, a correlation exists between promoter strength and homology index (18). Thus promoter strength generally decreases as PHI values become more negative. Some promoters, however, do not follow this generalization (11,12).

Column (g) signals significant discrepancies between the best promoter alignment consistent with the transcription start data and the overall best alignment (indicated with double underlines) independent of transcription start data. The number in this column is the PHI value of the overall best alignment. Only discrepancies in PHI greater than 0.5 are shown. Column (h) signals discrepancies between published -35 and -10 regions (single underlines) and those selected by our analysis. The number in this column is the PHI value of the published alignment. These PHI values will be less negative than that in

uvrB-P1	b	<u>TCAGTATAATTG</u> TTAGCA TAAITTAG	TACGACGAG TAAAT <u>TACAT</u> OCIGCOGCG	17	-1.0		9
uvrB-P2	b	<u>TCAGAAATATATG</u> GIGATG AACGTGTTT	TITATCCAG TATAAT <u>TIGTIG</u> GCATAATMA	18	-2.5		9
uvrB-P3	b	<u>ACAGTTATCCACTA</u> TTAGCTG TGGATAAC	<u>CATGIGAT</u> TAGAGT <u>TAGAAA</u> CCACGAGCA	17	-3.7		9
uvrC	b	<u>GCXCATTTGOCAGT</u> TGTCTT GAACTGA	<u>ATTCCAGAT</u> TATGCT <u>CATGatca</u> CCAAGG	17	-1.8	4	136
uvrD	b	<u>TGGAAATTTGOCGC</u> TTAGCA TCTCTGAC	<u>CTGCTGA</u> TATAAT <u>CAGCAA</u> TCGTGATAT	16	-1.1	3	137
434PR	f	<u>AAGAAAACGTGAT</u> TTAGCA AACCAAGAT	<u>ACATGIGAT</u> GAAAT <u>ACAAGA</u> AGTTTCTTGA	17	-1.3		9
434PRM	f	<u>ACAATGATCTTGT</u> TTAGCA AATCAGT	<u>TTTTCTGT</u> GAAGAT <u>TGGCGT</u> MAATACAGA	17	-2.4		9

List of promoter sequences arranged alphabetically by name (a) and aligned with respect to optimal -35 (c) and -10 hexamer sequences (d) consistent with the transcriptional start. Column (b) designates promoter type: b, bacterial; p, plasmid or transposon; f, phage; M, mutation or fusion which generates a new promoter; m, point mutation in an existing promoter. The lower case base(s) downstream of the -10 region denotes experimentally determined transcriptional start point(s). Column (e) indicates spacing in base pairs between -35 and -10 hexamers. Column (f) reports relative promoter homology index (PHI) of promoter elements in columns c,d,e as described in the text. Column (g) signals discrepancies between the promoter elements consistent with transcriptional start data and the best promoter elements independent of start data (indicated by double underlines). Only discrepancies for which the PHI values of these promoters differed by at least 0.5 are shown. Column (h) signals discrepancies between the computer selected promoter elements and published -35 and -10 sequences (shown by single underlines). The figures in these columns are PHI values corresponding to the underlined promoter elements. Column (i) indicates the nature of experimental data defining the transcription start: 1, total or partial RNA sequence with identification of the 5' nucleoside triphosphate; 2, mutational or genetic identification of -35 and -10 regions; 3, high resolution sizing of in vitro transcripts; 4, high resolution S1 nuclease mapping. The 112 promoters documented by Hawley and McClure (9) are included in this compilation and can be identified by a 9 in reference column (j).

* Only one of the -35 or -10 promoter hexamers was unambiguously identified, thus no PHI value for the published promoter can be given.

+ Underlined -35 and -10 regions for these genes represent heat shock promoter elements which are apparently recognized by a distinct heat shock sigma factor (34).

column (f) whenever a combination of -35 and -10 elements found by the computer or in the literature is (i) more consensus-like than the elements our program finds, but (ii) inconsistent with the transcription start data.

Base Distributions

Figure 1 shows the distribution of bases for analyzed promoters and indicates positions at which bases occur more frequently than chance by greater than 6 standard deviations (highly conserved, upper case bases) or 3 standard deviations (weakly conserved, lower case bases) (9). The base distribution of a compilation of random sequences is multinomial with probabilities p_T, p_G, p_C, p_A , where p_T, p_G, p_C, p_A are the frequencies of occurrence of T, G, C, and A, respectively. The standard deviation for each base X is $\sqrt{np_X(1-p_X)}$ where n=number of bases at that position. This statistic applies strictly only to

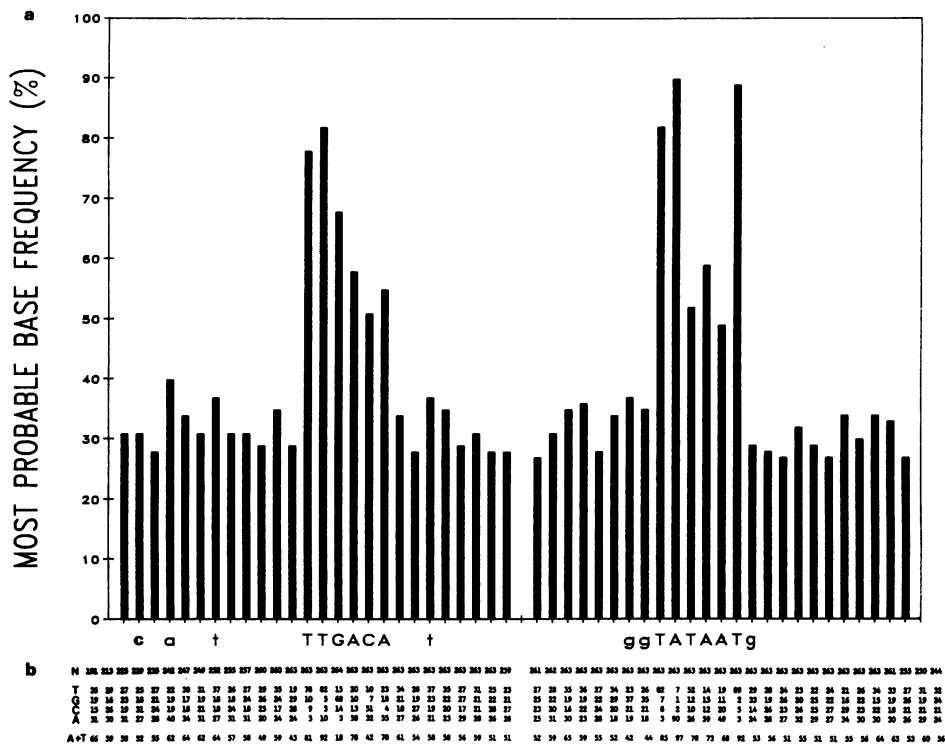


Figure 1. Base distribution of 263 analyzed promoters from Table 1. (a) Frequency histogram of the most highly conserved base on the non-template strand from 12 bp upstream of the -35 hexamer to 11 bp downstream of the -10 hexamer. Highly conserved (upper case) and weakly conserved (lower case) bases, as defined in the text, are shown below the histogram. (b) Frequency of bases (T, G, C, A and T+A) in aligned promoters as a percentage of total number of bases (N) at each position.

non-aligned positions. Frequencies T,G,C,A are 0.284, 0.225, 0.217, and 0.274, respectively, in non-aligned positions, yielding weakly conserved bases at -11, -9, -6, and +3 with respect to the -35 region, and -2, -1 and +1 with respect to the -10 region. Two of these bases (the A 9 bases upstream of the -35 and the G 2 bases upstream of the -10 region) were previously identified as weakly conserved by Hawley and McClure (9) using uniform base frequencies (.25, .25, .25, .25) and a Poisson approximation to the multinomial distribution. A similar consensus sequence was derived by Rosenberg and Court (7) from analysis of 46 promoters.

It is difficult to assign statistics to the conservation of bases in the aligned regions. However, using either the multinomial or Poisson distribution

TABLE 2
Base Distribution in -35 and -10 Regions

(a)		-35						-10					
		T	T	G	A	C	A	T	A	T	A	A	T
All Promoters	T	78	82	15	20	10	24	82	7	52	14	19	89
	G	10	5	68	10	7	17	7	1	12	15	11	2
	C	9	3	14	13	52	5	8	3	10	12	21	5
	A	3	10	3	58	32	54	3	89	26	59	49	3
Mean clonality		70						74					
(b)													
Spacer = 16 (n=55)	T	78	85	22	27	11	25	84	2	65	9	11	93
	G	9	4	67	9	7	13	5	0	7	9	11	2
	C	7	5	9	9	58	5	4	2	5	9	15	5
	A	5	5	2	55	24	56	7	96	22	73	64	0
Mean clonality		69						81					
(c)													
Spacer = 17 (n=140)	T	82	81	15	18	10	25	79	9	49	15	25	89
	G	7	6	70	8	9	14	9	1	16	15	12	2
	C	7	3	13	17	50	1	12	2	9	14	21	6
	A	4	10	2	57	32	60	1	88	26	56	43	3
Mean clonality		71						72					
(d)													
Spacer = 18 (n=50)	T	75	82	12	14	14	18	88	10	49	18	18	86
	G	18	6	69	14	4	29	4	2	6	20	12	2
	C	8	0	12	8	47	12	6	4	22	11	25	4
	A	0	12	8	65	35	41	2	84	24	51	45	8
Mean clonality		69						72					

Frequency of bases in -35 and -10 hexamers for (a) all 263 analyzed promoters from Table 1 (a), and promoters with 16 (b), 17 (c) or 18 (d) bp separating the -35 and -10 regions. Mean clonality for each region is the arithmetic average of clonalities for each position within the region. Clonality of a base position is the square of the sum of squared frequencies at that position (138).

(which yields a larger standard deviation) and any of the base frequencies discussed above, all bases in the -35 hexamer and -10 hexamer appear highly conserved.

We did not align sequences with respect to transcription start point since in many cases this point is not precisely defined, due either to alternative initiation sites or experimental error in this determination. Nevertheless, the most probable bases 6-10 bp downstream of the -10 region, corresponding to the transcription start area of most promoters, reflect the sequence of bases in this region (CAT).

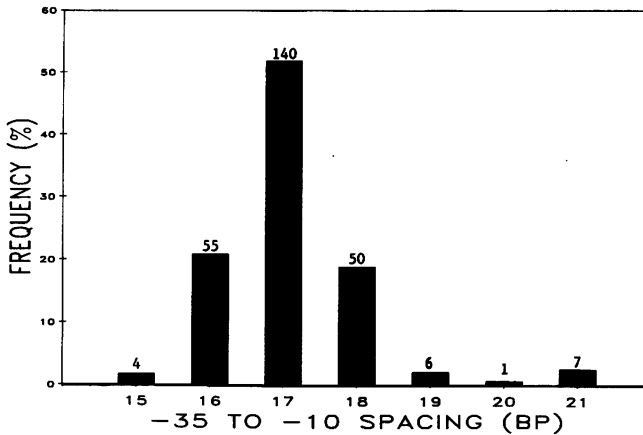


Figure 2. Distribution of promoters with 15-21 bp separating the -35 and -10 hexamers. The number of promoters in each group is indicated on top of the bars.

Base frequencies for -35 and -10 hexamers of all analyzed promoters are shown in Table 2a. Previous analysis of a limited compilation of promoter sequences suggested greater conservation of consensus-like sequences in promoters with -35 to -10 spacings of 16 or 18 bp than in promoters with the usual 17 bp spacing (J. McClarin and J. Hedgpeth, personal communication). To test this idea, subgroups of promoters with -35 to -10 spacing of 16, 17, or 18 bp were also tabulated (Table 2b-d). A composite measure of "clonality" for these regions (see Table legend) does not suggest an overall increase in conservation of bases in the -35 and -10 regions except in the -10 region of promoters with a 16 bp spacing. For these promoters, the -10 region is more consensus-like on average than the -10 region of other promoters. The statistical significance of these observations is difficult to determine since promoter sequences are not strictly independent.

Inter-region (-35 to -10) Spacing

Figure 2 shows the frequency of occurrence of promoters with 15-21 bp separating the -35 and -10 regions. As previously observed, this spacing is stringently constrained: 92% of all sequences are optimally aligned when 17±1 bp separate the -35 and -10 regions. This is consistent with known severe effects of spacer mutations (13-16) and our current understanding of RNA polymerase:promoter interaction in which the protein complex contacts one side of the DNA helix (8). Inter-region spacing outside the 16-18 bp range presumably requires unusual polymerase or DNA conformations since conserved

contact points would not lie on the same face of the DNA helix. Alternatively, the rarer inter-region distances may reflect interaction of regulatory proteins with RNA polymerase (1,2). It would be useful to obtain experimental data on interactions between RNA polymerase and DNA for promoters whose -35 to -10 spacing is thought to deviate significantly from 17 bp.

Other Analyses

We did not include weakly conserved bases flanking the -35 and -10 regions in the weight matrix since this would limit the range of possible alignments for the -35 and -10 regions. The significance of weakly conserved bases has not been well studied and the apparent conservation of some of these bases may reflect chance. Furthermore, an analysis of our compilation using a weight matrix based on an extended -35 and -10 region (the 9 most highly conserved positions in each region) produced results similar to those shown in Table 1 (unpublished data). Stronger homology might exist in these flanking bases if slight variability in their spacing from the -35 and -10 regions were allowed.

We also did not use weakly conserved bases near the transcription start in our weight matrix because mutation studies have not supported a role for this region in promoter recognition by RNA polymerase (22,23). However, initiation points were used to validate computer-selected -35 and -10 regions by disqualifying promoters whose -10 region was not within 4-12 bp upstream of the start point. A relatively wide range of separation between these regions was allowed since experimental error in determining the start point is often ± 2 bp and actual constraints dictated by promoter/polymerase interactions are not known. Despite the weak constraint on promoter position imposed by the program 75% of optimal promoter alignments were 7 ± 2 bp from the -10 hexamer (Fig. 3). This strengthens the notion that transcription initiation occurs 5-9 base pairs downstream from the -10 region. However, in 30 cases (column g), the program identified best-fit promoters inconsistent with the reported transcriptional start point. Such discrepancies have been noted for other, similar analyses (17,18,20) and have been attributed to either inadequacies in the computer algorithm for detecting promoters or inadequacies in experimental determination of transcriptional start points. These are likely explanations here as well, but since there have been few determinations of both polymerase contact points and sites of transcription initiation, a third possibility is that the true range of distance between the -10 and transcription start point has been underestimated.

McClure (2) outlined four generalizations of *E. coli* promoters from analysis of 112 promoters: (i) all promoters using sigma factor 70 have at least two of

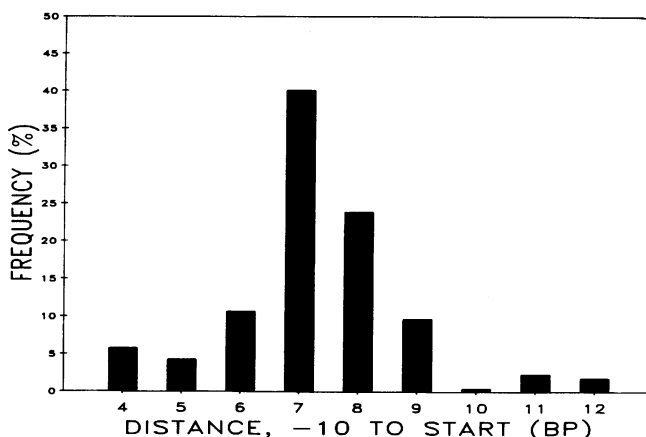


Figure 3. Distribution of promoters with transcription start points initiating 4-12 bases downstream of the -10 hexamer. Only promoters with uniquely defined start points are included in this analysis.

the three most highly conserved bases in the -10 region (TA...T), (ii) all promoters have at least one of the most highly conserved TTG residues in the -35 region, (iii) most promoters with poor homology to the consensus sequence in the -35 region are positively regulated, and (iv) promoters using sigma factor 32 during heat shock have similar, non-consensus-like -10 regions. Our analysis supports these generalizations although some exceptions exist: 4 promoters (*ada*, *cit.util-379*, *dapD*, and *ppc*) listed in Table 1 break rule (i) and 2 promoters (*lacP2* and *pyrB1-P1*) break rule (ii). Exceptions such as these are expected in larger compilations, but also might reflect differences in search algorithms. We have compared the ranking of the 112 promoters of Hawley and McClure (9) analyzed with the program of Mulligan et al. (16) with the ranking generated by our program. The correlation using Hawley and McClure's alignment was relatively high (Spearman rank-correlation coefficient = 0.81), but increased only slightly when our alignment was used (coefficient = 0.83). Therefore, there is no significant difference in the method by which the promoter homology score is derived.

SUMMARY

We have compiled and analyzed 263 promoters of *E. coli* including 112 studied by Hawley and McClure (9). The major difference in our approach is in the reiterative alignment of promoter regions to select -35 and -10 regions most consistent with the reference list of promoters and with known transcriptional

start points. The consensus sequence defined by this alignment (c.a.t.t....TTGACA..t.....ggTATAATg) is identical in sequence to that of previous reports in the highly conserved -35 and -10 hexamer regions (7,9), but differs in some of the weakly conserved bases. Most aligned promoter elements are identical to those identified by Hawley and McClure (9) or the investigators reporting the promoter sequence. However, in 64 cases -35 and -10 regions were selected which were more consensus-like in sequence or inter-region spacing than those proposed in the initial publication. Of these, 15 differed from that of the computer-selected promoter by more than one PHI unit corresponding to a factor of 10 in statistical similarity to the consensus promoter. The computer generated alignment of promoter elements is derived from and consistent with our current knowledge of promoter sequence and thus should provide the best indication of promoter structure.

Although this compilation and analysis is an improvement over previous analyses, it too suffers the limitation that without experimental data confirming points of interaction between RNA polymerase and -35 and -10 regions, it is not possible to align these regions by existing methods without introducing bias from the initial alignment. Assuming promoter regions are defined by restricted sequence data, the consensus sequence should be identified by a program which examines all possible alignments of all sequences. Execution of an exhaustive alignment algorithm is not presently feasible for large sequence compilations such as *E. coli* promoters. However, we suspect that such an analysis would not significantly alter the consensus promoter sequence as defined here.

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¹The promoter compilation will be provided upon receipt of a blank 5¼" disk.

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