

BOTANY

Biology and Diversity
of
Microbes
for
M.Sc. Botany Semester-I (Paper 4)

Author

Dr. Subhash Kumar

*Assistant Professor and HOD
CCR (PG) College, Muzaffarnagar*

Dr. Nitika

*Associate Professor
Dept. of Botany, GMV, Rampur Maniharan, Saharanpur*



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CONTENTS

UNIT 1. Microbiology : An Introduction

1-10

Pioneer microbiologists; golden era of microbiology. Research developments, opportunities, institutions and journals. Microbes' identifications through internet applications.

UNIT 2. Virus, Bacteria and Agricultural Microbiology

11-45

Introduction and general characteristics of Viruses, Classification of plant viruses. Isolation, purification and characterization of viruses. Replication, transmission of viruses, economic importance, symptomatology of plant viruses. Virus-induced cell transformation, virus-induced cancer. Cyanobacteria, Viroids, Prions. Archaeobacteria and Eubacteria: General account, ultrastructure, nutrition and reproduction, economic importance. Plasmids and their characteristics. 16s r-DNA sequencing. Agricultural Microbiology: Agriculturally important microorganisms, biological nitrogen fixation, Mycorrhizae, Plant diseases and their biocontrol. Plant growth promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR). Weed and Pest Biocontrol.

UNIT 3. Environmental Microbiology

46-69

Environmental Microbiology: Microbes and quality of environment. Microbial degradation of pesticides and hydrocarbons. Biodegradation of the agricultural residues. Bioremediation of contaminated soils and water. Microbes in nanotechnology. Biosensors, Biogas Production.

UNIT 4. Food and Industrial Microbiology

70-94

Food and Industrial Microbiology: Fermentation, fermenter design and growth processes. Food spoilage. Microbes in recovery of metal (bioleaching) and oil. Cell and enzyme immobilization. Microbial enzymes of industrial interest. Single Cell Protein. Vaccines.

UNIT 5. Host-Parasite Interaction

95-114

Host-parasite interaction: a brief idea of recognition and entry process of bacteria, viruses into animal & plant-host cells, alteration of host cell. Virus induced cancer; bacteria and plant two- component signaling systems; bacterial chemotaxis and quorum sensing. Hormones and their receptors, signaling through G-protein coupled receptors, regulation of signaling pathways.

UNIT 6. Innate and Adaptive Immune System

115-148

Innate and adaptive immune system: Types of Immunity, antigens, antigenicity, structure and function of antibody molecules, monoclonal antibodies, Antigen-antibody interactions (serology), activation & differentiation of B and T Cell, B & T cells receptors, MHC molecules complement system, immune response during bacterial (tuberculosis), parasitic (malaria) and Viral (HIV) infections, vaccine.

UNIT 7. Archaeobacteria, Eubacteria & Cyanobacteria

149-182

Isolation, purification and cultivation of microbes.

Important criteria used for classifications of microorganisms (morphological, ecological, biochemical, molecular and numerical).

Classification of bacteria based on Bergey's manual of determinative bacteriology.

Archaeobacteria and Eubacteria: Characters, Ultrastructure, nutrition, genetic recombination (Transformation, Transduction, Conjugation), and economic importance.

Cyanobacteria: salient features and biological importance.

UNIT 1 | Microbiology : An Introduction

Pioneer Microbiologists

The field of microbiology was built upon the meticulous work of visionary scientists who developed the tools and theories to study the invisible world.

Pioneer	Nationality	Key Contributions	Significance for Botany & Plant Pathology
Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723)	Dutch	First observation of microbes ("animalcules") using single-lens microscopes of his own design.	Laid the foundation for understanding that a hidden world of life exists, including microbes associated with plants.
Louis Pasteur (1822-1895)	French	Disproved Spontaneous Generation (Swan-neck flask experiment). Developed pasteurization. Germ Theory of Disease. Vaccines (Anthrax, Rabies).	His work on fermentation was crucial. Germ Theory directly led to the understanding that microbes (bacteria, fungi) cause plant diseases.
Robert Koch (1843-1910)	German	Established Koch's Postulates - the definitive proof that a specific microbe causes a specific disease. Pure culture techniques (using agar).	Cornerstone of Plant Pathology. Used to confirm the pathogenic role of fungi like Puccinia (rusts) and bacteria like Xanthomonas (blights).
Martinus W. Beijerinck (1851-1931)	Dutch	Discovery of Viruses (TMV). Concept of the Virus as a <i>contagium vivum fluidum</i> (contagious living fluid). Enrichment Culture Technique.	Crucial for Botany. Discovered the first virus (Tobacco Mosaic Virus), founding virology. His enrichment technique allowed for the isolation of diverse soil microbes, including nitrogen-fixing bacteria.

Pioneer	Nationality	Key Contributions	Significance for Botany & Plant Pathology
Sergei Winogradsky (1856-1953)	Russian	Concept of Chemolithotrophy. Discovery of Nitrogen-fixing bacteria (<i>Clostridium pasteurianum</i>). Sulfur-oxidizing bacteria. Pioneer of Microbial Ecology.	Foundational for Soil Microbiology. His work explained key nutrient cycles (N, S) in soil essential for plant growth. Highlighted the role of microbes in soil fertility.
Dmitri Iwanowski (1864-1920)	Russian	First to demonstrate the infectious nature of TMV by passing sap through a Chamberland filter that retained bacteria.	His work, alongside Beijerinck, was pivotal in identifying viruses as a new class of plant pathogens.

The Golden Era of Microbiology (c. 1850-1920)

This period was marked by a rapid succession of discoveries that established microbiology as a scientific discipline.

📖 Key Themes:

1. **Triumph of Germ Theory:** Replacing miasma theory with the understanding that specific microbes cause specific diseases.
2. **Development of Laboratory Techniques:** Standardization of staining, pure culture methods, and sterilization.
3. **Birth of Immunology and Chemotherapy:** Discovery of vaccines (Pasteur) and the first "magic bullet," Salvarsan, by Paul Ehrlich (1910).
4. **Discovery of Viruses:** Establishing a new, non-cellular form of infectious agent.
5. **Understanding Microbial Metabolism:** Winogradsky's work on chemosynthesis and nutrient cycling.

Research Developments, Opportunities, Institutions, and Journals

📖 Research Developments: From Past to Present

- **Traditional:** Morphology, staining, biochemical tests, culture-dependent studies.
- **Molecular Revolution:**
 - **PCR and Sequencing:** Allowed for identification and phylogenetic analysis without culturing (16S rRNA for bacteria/archaea, ITS for fungi).
 - **Genomics and Metagenomics:** Sequencing entire microbial genomes or all genetic material from an environment (e.g., rhizosphere soil). This has revealed immense uncultured diversity.
 - **CRISPR-Cas:** A bacterial immune system repurposed as a gene-editing tool, revolutionizing genetics.
 - **Synthetic Biology:** Engineering microbes for specific tasks (e.g., biofertilizers, biopesticides).

👉 Opportunities for MSc Botany Graduates

- **Agricultural Microbiology:** Biofertilizer and biopesticide industry (e.g., at IFFCO, IPL Biologicals). Soil health and rhizosphere management.
- **Plant Pathology:** Disease diagnostician, researcher in institutes, agrochemical companies (Bayer, Syngenta).
- **Environmental Microbiology:** Bioremediation of polluted soils and water, waste management.
- **Food Microbiology:** Food safety, fermentation technology.
- **Research & Academia:** Pursue PhD, work as Project Fellows/JRF in research projects.
- **Pharmaceutical & Industrial Microbiology:** Production of antibiotics, enzymes, and other metabolites.

👉 Prominent Indian Institutions

- **ICAR Institutes:**
 - **IARI (Indian Agricultural Research Institute), New Delhi:** Premier institute for agricultural research, including plant pathology and microbiology.
 - **NBRI (National Botanical Research Institute), Lucknow:** Focus on plant-microbe interactions.
 - "CSIR Institutes:
 - **IMTECH (Institute of Microbial Technology), Chandigarh:** India's premier institute for microbial research and biotechnology.
 - **CCMB (Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology), Hyderabad:** Strong focus on genomics and molecular biology.
- **University of Delhi, South Campus:** Renowned Department of Botany and Microbiology.

- **Bose Institute, Kolkata:** Historical and high-impact research in plant sciences and microbiology.
- **M.K. University, Madurai:** School of Biological Sciences with strong microbial research.
- **National Centre for Microbial Resource (NCMR), Pune:** Part of NCCS, it is the national repository for microbial cultures.

👉 Key Scientific Journals

- **High-Impact General Science:** *Nature, Science, PNAS.*
- **Top Microbiology Journals:**
 - *Nature Reviews Microbiology*
 - *Annual Review of Microbiology*
 - *Cell Host & Microbe*
 - *Trends in Microbiology*
- **Specialized Journals Highly Relevant to Botany:**
 - *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*
 - *The ISME Journal (International Society for Microbial Ecology)*
 - *Molecular Plant-Microbe Interactions (MPMI)*
 - *Phytopathology*
 - *Plant and Soil*
 - *FEMS Microbiology Ecology*
- **Important Indian Journals:**
 - *Indian Phytopathology*
 - *Journal of Biosciences*
 - *Proceedings of the Indian National Science Academy (PINSAs)*

Microbial Identification through Internet Applications

Modern taxonomy relies heavily on genetic data. Several web-based tools are essential for this.

👉 Nucleotide Sequence Databases

- **GenBank (NCBI, USA):** A comprehensive public database of all known nucleotide sequences.
- **EMBL-EBI (Europe):** European Molecular Biology Laboratory's database.
- **DDBJ (Japan):** DNA Data Bank of Japan.
- These three databases synchronize daily and form the International Nucleotide Sequence Database Collaboration (INSDC).

👉 Steps for Molecular Identification of an Unknown Microbe (e.g., from plant rhizosphere):

1. Isolate DNA from the microbial culture.
2. PCR Amplify a marker gene:
 - **For Bacteria/Archaea:** 16S rRNA gene (universal, highly conserved).
 - **For Fungi:** Internal Transcribed Spacer (ITS) region of ribosomal DNA.
3. Sequence the PCR product.
4. Analyze the Sequence Online:
 - **BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool - NCBI):**
 - The most common tool. Compares your sequence against all sequences in the database.
 - Use blastn suite for nucleotide vs. nucleotide search.
 - The results are ranked by Percent Identity and E-value. A high identity (>97-99%) and a low E-value (~0.0) suggest a close match to a known species.
 - EzBioCloud / EzTaxon:
 - A curated database of 16S rRNA sequences for prokaryotes. More

reliable for species-level identification than the non-curated GenBank.

– UNITE:

- A curated database for Fungal ITS sequences. Essential for accurate identification of fungi, including environmental species.

👉 Phylogenetic Analysis

- **Objective:** To understand the evolutionary relationship of your isolate.
- Process:
 1. Retrieve related sequences from BLAST/ EzBioCloud.
 2. Perform Multiple Sequence Alignment using tools like Clustal Omega or MUSCLE.
 3. Construct a Phylogenetic Tree (e.g., Neighbor-Joining, Maximum Likelihood) using software like MEGA (Molecular Evolutionary Genetics Analysis), which has a user-friendly interface.
- **Outcome:** A tree showing the clade where your unknown microbe fits, providing a visual and statistical basis for its identification.

Practical Exercise for Students:

- Take a provided 16S rRNA gene sequence (e.g., of a common *Rhizobium*).
- Perform a BLAST search on the NCBI website and identify the top 5 matches with their percent identity.
- Use the "Send" function in BLAST to retrieve these sequences.
- Use MEGA software to align the sequences and build a simple phylogenetic tree to visualize the relationships.

QUESTION



Section A. Very Short Answer Type Questions

1. Who is known as the 'Father of Microbiology'?

Ans. Antonie van Leeuwenhoek.

2. What is the significance of the 'Golden Era of Microbiology'?

Ans. It was a period (approx. 1850-1920) of rapid discovery where the role of microbes in disease, fermentation, and the cycle of life was established, solidifying microbiology as a science.

3. Name the scientist who discovered penicillin.

Ans. Alexander Fleming.

4. Who proposed the 'Germ Theory of Disease'?

Ans. Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch are the key figures credited with proving and popularizing the Germ Theory.

5. Give the full form of NCCS.

Ans. National Centre for Microbial Resource (formerly National Centre for Cell Science).

6. Name one premier Indian institution for microbiological research.

Ans. National Centre for Microbial Resource (NCCS), Pune.

7. What is the primary focus of the journal 'Antonie van Leeuwenhoek'?

Ans. It publishes research in the field of general microbiology.

8. Who developed the technique of vaccination against smallpox?

Ans. Edward Jenner.

9. Name an online database used for microbial identification.

Ans. Ribosomal Database Project (RDP) or BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool).

10. What did Alexander Fleming observe that led to the discovery of antibiotics?

Ans. He observed a zone of inhibition where the growth of *Staphylococcus* bacteria was prevented around a contaminating *Penicillium* mold on a culture plate.

Section B. Short Answer Type Questions

11. Write a short note on the contribution of Louis Pasteur to the field of microbiology.

Ans. Louis Pasteur is one of the most important founders of microbiology. His key contributions include:

- **Disproving Spontaneous Generation:** Through his famous swan-neck flask experiment, he demonstrated that microbes come from pre-existing microbes, ending the debate on spontaneous generation for larger organisms.

- **Germ Theory of Disease:** He established that microorganisms are the cause of many diseases, revolutionizing medicine.
- **Vaccination:** He developed the first vaccines for rabies and anthrax, introducing the concept of attenuated (weakened) strains.
- **Fermentation:** He proved that fermentation is caused by living microorganisms (yeasts and bacteria) and introduced pasteurization to destroy unwanted microbes in wine, beer, and milk.

12. Explain the significance of Robert Koch's postulates.

Ans. Robert Koch's postulates are a set of four criteria designed to establish a causal relationship between a microbe and a specific disease. Their significance is profound:

- **Scientific Rigor:** They provided a systematic, experimental method to prove pathogenicity, moving medicine from superstition to evidence-based science.
- **Foundation of Medical Microbiology:** They became the gold standard for identifying the causative agents of infectious diseases (e.g., Koch himself identified the bacteria causing tuberculosis and cholera).
- **Guiding Principle:** Even today, with modifications for viruses and unculturable bacteria, the logic of the postulates remains a guiding principle in epidemiology and disease research.

13. Write a short note on the role of the 'Golden Era' in establishing microbiology as a scientific discipline.

Ans. The 'Golden Era of Microbiology' (c. 1850-1920) was pivotal in establishing microbiology as a distinct and credible science. Before this, microbes were curiosities. The work of pioneers like Pasteur, Koch, and others provided the experimental and theoretical foundation:

- **Definitive Proof:** Pasteur's work definitively disproved spontaneous generation, proving microbes had biological origins.
- **Etiology of Disease:** Koch's postulates provided a rigorous framework to link specific microbes to specific diseases, creating the field of medical microbiology.
- **Pure Culture Techniques:** Koch and his colleagues developed methods (solid media, petri dishes) to isolate and study pure microbial cultures, which is the bedrock of microbiological research.
- **Control and Prevention:** Discoveries like vaccination (Pasteur), antiseptic surgery (Lister), and the first antibiotics (Fleming, later) showed the practical power of the new science.

14. Describe the contribution of Dr. Yellapragada Subbarao to microbiology.

Ans. Dr. Yellapragada Subbarao was an Indian biochemist who made several landmark contributions, though he remains an unsung hero.

- **Discovery of ATP:** He played a key role in the discovery of Adenosine Triphosphate (ATP) as the primary energy currency of the cell.
- **Methotrexate:** He developed Methotrexate, one of the first effective chemotherapy drugs and a treatment for cancer and autoimmune diseases.

- **Antibiotics:** He led the discovery of Aureomycin (chlortetracycline), the first broad-spectrum tetracycline antibiotic. This was a major breakthrough in the treatment of a wide range of bacterial infections.

Section C. Long Answer Type Questions

15. Discuss the important contributions of any three pioneer microbiologists.

Ans. The foundation of microbiology was laid by several pioneering scientists whose work transformed our understanding of the living world. Three of the most critical figures are Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, Louis Pasteur, and Robert Koch.

1. Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723): The First Microbiologist

- **Contribution:** Leeuwenhoek was not a trained scientist but a draper. Using simple but powerful single-lens microscopes that he crafted himself, he became the first person to observe and describe the microbial world.
- **Key Discoveries:** He meticulously documented his observations of what he called "animalcules" in various samples like rainwater, pond water, and dental plaque. He described bacteria, protozoa, algae, and yeast, opening a completely new frontier of life.
- **Impact:** His work provided the first evidence of a vast, previously invisible world of microorganisms, earning him the title "Father of Microbiology." He established the science of microscopy.

2. Louis Pasteur (1822-1895): The Experimentalist Who Debunked Myths

- **Contribution:** Pasteur was a chemist who used rigorous experimentation to solve biological problems.
 - **Disproof of Spontaneous Generation:** Through his famous swan-neck flask experiment, he demonstrated that microbes come from pre-existing microbes in the air, definitively disproving the theory of spontaneous generation for microorganisms.
 - **Germ Theory of Disease:** He established that microorganisms are the cause, not the consequence, of disease and fermentation.
 - **Vaccination:** He developed the first laboratory-created vaccines for anthrax and rabies, introducing the concept of attenuated (weakened) vaccines.
 - **Pasteurization:** He developed the process of heating liquids to kill most spoilage and pathogenic microbes, a process named after him.

3. Robert Koch (1843-1910): The Master of Medical Microbiology

- **Contribution:** Koch was a physician who provided the systematic methodology to link a specific microbe to a specific disease.
 - **Koch's Postulates:** He formulated a set of four criteria (Koch's Postulates) that must be fulfilled to prove a microorganism causes a specific disease. This became the cornerstone of medical microbiology.
 - **Pure Culture Techniques:** He pioneered the use of solid media (initially potato slices, then agar) to isolate pure bacterial colonies, a technique still fundamental to the field.

- **Identification of Pathogens:** Using his methods, he identified the causative agents of tuberculosis (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*) and cholera (*Vibrio cholerae*).

Together, these three pioneers moved microbiology from mere observation (Leeuwenhoek) to experimental proof (Pasteur) and finally to a rigorous, systematic science (Koch).

16. "The period between 1857 and 1914 can be termed as the Golden Era of Microbiology." Justify this statement by describing the key discoveries made during this period.

Ans. The period from approximately 1857 to 1914 is rightly called the "Golden Era of Microbiology" because it was a time of explosive, foundational discoveries that established microbiology as a definitive scientific discipline and revolutionized medicine and industry.

Justification through Key Discoveries:

- 1. Final Disproof of Spontaneous Generation (1859-1864):** Louis Pasteur's elegant swan-neck flask experiments (published 1861) provided irrefutable evidence that microbes arise from pre-existing microbes, ending a centuries-old debate and establishing a fundamental principle of biology.
- 2. Germ Theory of Disease (1860s-1870s):** The work of Pasteur, Koch, and Joseph Lister established that specific microorganisms cause specific diseases. This was a paradigm shift from miasma and other supernatural theories of disease.
- 3. Koch's Postulates (1876-1884):** Robert Koch's formulation of his four postulates provided a rigorous, logical framework for proving the etiology of infectious diseases. This systematic approach led to the rapid identification of pathogens like those causing anthrax, tuberculosis, and cholera.
- 4. Development of Laboratory Techniques (1880s):**
 - **Pure Culture Methods:** Koch's introduction of solid media (agar) and the petri dish (invented by his assistant Julius Petri) allowed for the isolation and study of pure microbial cultures, which is the bedrock of microbiological research.
 - **Staining Techniques:** Development of dyes and stains (e.g., Gram stain by Hans Christian Gram in 1884) allowed for the visualization and differentiation of bacteria under the microscope.
- 5. Advances in Immunology and Vaccination (1880s-1890s):**
 - Pasteur developed the first artificial vaccines for chicken cholera, anthrax, and rabies.
 - Emil von Behring and Shibasaburo Kitasato discovered antitoxins, leading to serotherapy for diphtheria and tetanus.
- 6. Discovery of Viruses (1892-1898):** Dmitri Ivanovsky and Martinus Beijerinck discovered that the causative agent of tobacco mosaic disease could pass through filters that trapped bacteria, leading to the discovery of viruses.

This concentrated period of discovery provided the tools, theories, and principles that defined the field. It moved microbiology from a descriptive science to an experimental one, with direct and profound impacts on public health, medicine, and surgery, truly making it a "Golden Era."

17. Explain the various internet-based applications and genomic tools used for the identification and classification of microorganisms.

Ans. The identification and classification of microorganisms have been revolutionized by the advent of internet-based applications and genomic tools, moving beyond traditional culture-based methods to rapid, precise, and high-throughput molecular techniques.

A. Genomic Tools:

1. DNA Sequencing: The cornerstone of modern microbial identification. The sequence of specific genes or the whole genome provides the most definitive identification.

- **16S rRNA Gene Sequencing:** The gold standard for identifying and classifying bacteria and archaea. This gene has both conserved regions (for primer binding) and variable regions (for species differentiation).
- **Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS):** Provides the complete genetic blueprint, allowing for the highest resolution in strain typing, outbreak investigation, and the discovery of new metabolic pathways.

2. Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR): Amplifies specific DNA sequences. Variations like Real-Time PCR (qPCR) are used for rapid detection and quantification of specific pathogens directly from samples.

B. Internet-Based Applications and Databases: These tools are used to analyze the data generated by genomic tools.

1. BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool):

- **Function:** A fundamental algorithm for comparing a query DNA or protein sequence against massive public databases (like GenBank).
- **Use in ID:** A researcher sequences the 16S rRNA gene of an unknown bacterium and uses BLAST to find the most similar sequences in the database. The closest match(es) indicate the likely identity of the unknown microbe.

2. Ribosomal Database Project (RDP):

- **Function:** A curated, specialized database specifically for ribosomal RNA sequences.
- **Use in ID/Classification:** It provides tools like the RDP Classifier that automatically assign a taxonomic hierarchy to a submitted 16S rRNA sequence, from phylum to genus.

3. Barcode of Life Data System (BOLD):

- **Function:** A dedicated platform for the development and application of DNA barcoding (using a short, standard genetic marker).
- **Use in ID:** It is particularly useful for eukaryotic microorganisms and for building reference libraries for environmental sampling.

These tools have enabled culture-independent identification, discovery of unculturable microbes, and a more accurate, phylogeny-based classification system, transforming microbial taxonomy into a robust and data-driven science.

18. "Microbial identification has been revolutionized by computational tools." Elaborate on this statement.

Ans. This statement is profoundly accurate. Computational tools, or bioinformatics, have transformed microbial identification from a slow, culture-dependent process relying on phenotypic traits to a rapid, high-throughput, and precise science based on genotypic data.

The Revolution:

1. From Phenotype to Genotype:

- **Traditional Method:** Identification relied on observing morphology, staining, and a battery of biochemical tests, which could take days to weeks and was often inconclusive for slow-growing or fastidious organisms.
- **Computational Revolution:** Identification is now based on DNA sequence data, which is a direct, unambiguous reflection of an organism's identity. The most common target is the 16S rRNA gene.

2. The Role of Key Computational Tools:

- **BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool):** This is the workhorse. A researcher sequences a gene from an unknown microbe and uses BLAST to compare it against massive online databases (like GenBank). The tool finds the most similar sequences and provides a list of matches with statistical scores, allowing for immediate identification. This can be done in minutes to hours.
- **Ribosomal Database Project (RDP):** This is a specialized, curated database for rRNA sequences. Its Classifier tool automatically assigns a taxonomic label (from phylum to genus) to a submitted 16S sequence, streamlining the classification process.
- **Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) and Bioinformatics Pipelines:** For the highest resolution, the entire genome of a microbe is sequenced. Computational pipelines then assemble the millions of DNA fragments and compare the entire genome to databases. This allows for:
 - **Strain-Level Identification:** Crucial for tracking the source of a disease outbreak.
 - **Detection of Virulence and Resistance Genes:** Identifying specific genes that make a pathogen dangerous or resistant to antibiotics directly from the sequence data.

3. Impact and Advantages:

- **Speed and Throughput:** Hundreds of samples can be processed and identified simultaneously.
- **Accuracy and Objectivity:** Removes the subjectivity of interpreting phenotypic tests.
- **Culture-Independent Identification:** Allows identification of the >99% of microbes that cannot be easily grown in a lab (via metagenomics).
- **Discovery of Novel Microbes:** Computational comparisons can reveal that a sequence is significantly different from all known ones, flagging a potentially new species.

In conclusion, computational tools have not just improved microbial identification; they have fundamentally rewritten the rules, making it faster, more accurate, and unlocking the vast, uncultured microbial diversity on our planet.