Cooperativity and additivity in plant enhancers

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Short title: Cooperativity and additivity in plant enhancers

Abstract

Enhancers are *cis*-regulatory elements that shape gene expression in response to numerous developmental and environmental cues. In animals, several models have been proposed to explain how enhancers integrate the activity of multiple transcription factors. However, it remains largely unknown how plant enhancers integrate transcription factor activity. Here, we use Plant STARR-seq to characterize three light-responsive plant enhancers—*AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9*—derived from genes active in photosynthesis. Saturation mutagenesis reveals mutations, many of which cluster in short regions, that strongly reduce enhancer activity in the light, in the dark or in both conditions. When tested in the light, these mutation-sensitive regions do not function on their own; rather, cooperative interactions with other such regions are required for full activity. Epistatic interactions occur between mutations in adjacent mutation-sensitive regions, and the spacing and order of mutation-sensitive regions in synthetic enhancers affects enhancer activity. In contrast, when tested in the dark, mutation-sensitive regions act independently and additively in conferring enhancer activity. Taken together, this work demonstrates that plant enhancers show evidence for both cooperative and additive interactions among their functional elements. This knowledge can be harnessed to design strong, condition-specific synthetic enhancers.

Introduction

Enhancers play a pivotal role in orchestrating the precise gene expression programs required for plants to develop and thrive in concert with their ever-changing abiotic and biotic environments (Schmitz et al., 2022; Marand et al., 2023). They integrate spatiotemporal, developmental, and environmental cues by binding to transcription factors to enhance the transcription of their target genes.

   Three models have been proposed to explain how enhancers in animal cells integrate the activity of multiple transcription factors (Arnosti and Kulkarni, 2005; Spitz and Furlong, 2012; Jindal and Farley, 2021; Kim and Wysocka, 2023). In the "billboard" model, the binding or activity of individual transcription factors is not dependent on other factors binding to the same enhancer (Kulkarni and Arnosti, 2003; de Boer et al., 2020). In contrast, in the "enhanceosome" model, enhancers recruit a highly ordered

transcription factor complex (Thanos and Maniatis, 1995; Panne, 2008). Full activity is

reached only in the presence of all complex members, and enhancer activity is

drastically reduced if even a single transcription factor is missing or if the enhancer

grammar—the orientation, spacing, and order of the individual transcription factor

binding sites—is altered. Finally, the "transcription factor collective" model describes

enhancers that recruit a complex composed of multiple transcription factors—all of

which are necessary for full activity—without requiring a fixed enhancer grammar

(Junion et al., 2012; Uhl et al., 2016). The three models differ in two main aspects: their

requirement for a specific enhancer grammar (high for the enhanceosome model; low

for the billboard and transcription factor collective models) and the degree of

cooperativity between the recruited transcription factors (high for the enhanceosome

and transcription factor collective models; low for the billboard model). Hence, grammar

and cooperativity are key characteristics of enhancers (Kim et al., 2022; Friedman et al.,

2023; Song et al., 2023).

To date, only a few enhancers in plants have been well characterized (Weber et al.,

2016; Schmitz et al., 2022). Like their animal counterparts, plant enhancers function

independently of orientation, are active over a wide range of distances, and occur

upstream or downstream of their target promoter (Weber et al., 2016; Schmitz et al.,

2022; Marand et al., 2023). Despite these similarities, enhancers in plants and animals

differ in their histone modifications (Lu et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2019; Silver et al., 2023).

The absence in plants of the canonical histone modifications that mark active enhancers

in animals is consistent with the absence in plants of the bi-directional, short-lived

enhancer RNAs found in animals (Erhard et al., 2015; Hetzel et al., 2016; Thieffry et al.,

2020; Mcdonald et al., 2023; Silver et al., 2023). Thus, plants appear to use different

mechanisms than animals for maintaining enhancer activity.

Promoter-bashing approaches and testing of synthetic promoters assembled from

transcription factor binding sites have generated evidence for cooperative interactions

between functional sub-elements in plants (Benfey et al., 1990; Walcher and

Nemhauser, 2012; Cai et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). However, we sought to

interrogate enhancers at nucleotide resolution with saturation mutagenesis. We

therefore took advantage of the Plant STARR-seq method (Jores et al., 2020, 2023) to
characterize the functional underpinnings of three light-responsive plant enhancers:
AB80 from the pea *Pisum sativum*, *Cab-1* from the wheat *Triticum aestivum*, and
rbcS-E9 from *P. sativum*. We identify several mutation-sensitive regions within each
enhancer that are crucial for condition-specific activity. In the light, strong cooperativity
between these regions is displayed, whereas in the dark the mutation-sensitive regions
that contribute to enhancer activity function largely independent of each other.

Results

Enhancers from photosynthesis genes show light-responsive activity

We used Plant STARR-seq to dissect three enhancers that are associated with
photosynthesis genes and possess light-responsive activity (Fluhr et al., 1986; Simpson
et al., 1986; Nagy et al., 1987). The *AB80* and *Cab-1* enhancers drive the expression of
chlorophyl a-b binding proteins, and the *rbcS-E9* enhancer regulates the expression of a
small subunit of the ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate carboxylase. We previously
demonstrated that Plant STARR-seq detects the light-responsive activity of these three
enhancers (Jores et al., 2020).
We sought to carry out complete saturation mutagenesis of the three enhancers
using array synthesis, which limits the length of oligonucleotides that can be
synthesized. Therefore, we first tested whether 169-bp long segments, that are
amenable to array synthesis, derived from the 5′ or 3′ end of each enhancer show light-
responsive activity. We cloned the full-length (as defined by restriction enzyme-based
truncation analysis in: Fluhr et al., 1986; Simpson et al., 1986; Nagy et al., 1987) and
truncated enhancer segments upstream of the 35S minimal promoter controlling the
expression of a barcoded green fluorescent protein (GFP) reporter gene and subjected
the pooled library to Plant STARR-seq in tobacco (*Nicotiana benthamiana*) leaves
(Figure 1A). To test for light-responsive enhancer activity, we kept the transiently
transformed tobacco plants in either normal light/dark cycles (16 h light and 8 h dark) or
completely in the dark for two days prior to RNA extraction. While the 35S enhancer,
included as a control, showed strong and largely light-independent activity, the activity
of the three plant enhancers was light-dependent (Figure 1, B and C).

In the light, the 5′ and 3′ segments of the *AB80* enhancer were active, albeit not to

the extent of the full-length enhancer. In the dark, the *AB80* 5′ segment retained the

weak activity of the full-length enhancer, whereas its 3′ segment was inactive (Figure

1B). In the light, the *Cab-1* 3′ segment showed similar strength compared to the full-

length enhancer; however, in the dark this segment showed 2-fold higher activity than

the full-length enhancer did. The *Cab-1* 5′ segment showed no enhancer activity in

either condition (Figure 1B). The *rbcS-E9* enhancer showed stronger activity in the dark

than in the light, and this activity was retained in both the 5′ and 3′ segments. However,

in the light, the *rbcS-E9* 3′ segment showed approximately 3-fold more activity than the

full-length enhancer, whereas the 5′ segment was inactive (Figure 1B).

While the 169-bp enhancer segments were generally weaker than their full-length

counterparts, this was not always the case. The *Cab-1* 3' segment showed higher

activity than the full-length enhancer in the dark and the *rbcS-E9* 3' segment showed

higher activity than the full-length enhancer in the light (Figure 1B). These observations

suggest that the *Cab-1* and *rbcS-E9* enhancers also harbor putative repressive

elements. These repressive elements reside outside of the 3' enhancer segments in

both enhancers.

Enhancer constructs were tested both in the forward and the reverse orientation

because enhancers are expected to function in an orientation-independent manner

(Banerji et al., 1981; Fang et al., 1989; Jores et al., 2020; Schmitz et al., 2022). Indeed,

we observed this property for the full-length and truncated plant enhancers assayed

here (Supplemental Figure S1). At least two biological replicates were performed for all

experiments, and the results were highly reproducible (R^2 ≥ 0.87; Supplemental Figure

S2).

Finally, we confirmed that the 169-bp enhancer segments active in the transient Plant

STARR-seq assay also show enhancer activity when assayed in stable transgenic lines.

We cloned the 3′ segments of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers upstream of a

35S minimal promoter driving the expression of nanoluciferase. The T-DNA also

contained a luciferase gene controlled by the constitutive *Arabidopsis thaliana*

POLYUBIQUITIN 10 promoter to control for effects on expression due to genomic

context (Figure 1D). We generated transgenic *Arabidopsis* Col-0 lines harboring these

T-DNAs and measured nanoluciferase and luciferase activities in T2 plants from five

independent lines. We detected high enhancer activity (indicated by a high

nanoluciferase/luciferase ratio) for the 3′ segments of the *AB80* and *rbcS-E9* enhancers

in *Arabidopsis*. However, the 3′ segment of the *Cab-1* enhancer showed low activity

(Figure 1E). Shifting the transgenic *Arabidopsis* plants to the dark for four days prior to

sample collection did not change the observed nanoluciferase/luciferase ratios

(Supplemental Figure S3), presumably because nanoluciferase protein turnover is low

in planta. Nonetheless, we observed a strong correlation between the Plant STARR-seq

and dual-luciferase assays in the light (Figure 1F).

In summary, except for the 5′ segment of *Cab-1*, the 169-bp enhancer segments

function as enhancers in at least one light regime, either upregulated in the light or

upregulated in the dark (Figure 1B). Therefore, the shortened enhancer segments can

be used to study the condition-specific activity of plant enhancers.

Plant enhancers contain multiple mutation-sensitive regions

To identify regions of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers that confer enhancer

activity, we subjected the shortened enhancer segments to saturation mutagenesis. We

array-synthesized all possible single-nucleotide substitution, deletion, and insertion

variants of the 5′ and 3′ segments of the three enhancers, and measured their enhancer

strength with Plant STARR-seq in the light and the dark. We determined the activity of

over 99% of all possible single-nucleotide variants (Supplemental Data Set 1). While

most mutations had little to no effect, some of the variants resulted in an up to four-fold

increase or to a decrease to as low as 1/20 in enhancer strength relative to the wild-type

sequence (Supplemental Figure S4).

Mutations in all three enhancers with a negative effect on enhancer strength often

clustered together, revealing mutation-sensitive regions (Figure 2; Supplemental Figure

S5). The effect sizes of mutations within the mutation-sensitive regions in each

enhancer were consistent with our observations on the light-responsive activity of the

respective wild-type enhancer segments (Figure 1B). For the *AB80* and *Cab-1*

enhancers, the effect sizes of mutations within the mutation-sensitive regions were

much greater in the light than in the dark (Figure 2, A and B). For the *rbcS-E9* enhancer,

mutation-sensitive regions in the dark overlapped between the 5' and 3' segments, while

mutation-sensitive regions in the light resided both in the overlap region and closer to

the 3' end (Figure 2C). These observations are consistent with our findings that both

segments showed similar enhancer strength in the dark compared to the full-length

enhancer, whereas only the 3' segment was active in the light (Figure 1B).

The 5′ and 3′ segments of each enhancer overlap partially (overlap length: 91 bp for

AB80, 70 bp for *Cab-1*, and 104 bp for *rbcS-E9*). We asked whether mutations in the

overlap region show similar effects when tested in the context of the 5′ or 3′ segment in

the light or dark. In the dark, context did not matter for the effects of mutations. For

example, the mutation-sensitive regions in the *rbcS-E9* enhancer reside in similar

positions (Figure 2C) and mutational effects in the 5′ and 3′ segments of the *rbcS-E9*

enhancer strongly correlated (Supplemental Figure S6)*.* Although the *AB80* and *Cab-1*

enhancers showed little activity in the dark, the variant effects in their respective overlap

regions showed positive correlation in this condition. In contrast, for all three enhancers,

correlations between variant effects in the overlap region were lower in the light

(Supplemental Figure S6). In the light, both the *Cab-1* and the *rbcS-E9* enhancer

harbored mutation-sensitive regions in the parts of the 3′ segment part that overlap with

the 5′ segment. However, mutations in the corresponding locations of the 5′ segment

were weaker or showed no effect on enhancer function (Figure 2, B and C). We

conclude that the presence of a mutation-sensitive region, and the effect sizes of

mutations within it, depends on the surrounding sequence context (*i.e.*, whether it was

tested in the 5′ or 3′ segment) in the light, suggesting cooperative interactions among

individual enhancer regions in this condition.

Mutation-sensitive regions harbor transcription factor binding sites

Because enhancers function by recruiting transcription factors, we searched the

enhancer sequences for matches to known transcription factor binding motifs (O'Malley

et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2020; Jores et al., 2021). This approach identified 41 putative

binding sites; however, 32 (78%) of them were located outside of mutation-sensitive

regions, and 5 of the 14 mutation-sensitive regions were not predicted to contain any

transcription factor binding site (Supplemental Figure S7).

As an alternative approach, we leveraged the saturation mutagenesis data to identify

sequence motifs that contribute to enhancer function. To this end, we manually selected

regions (referred to by lowercase letters from a to e) in the 3′ segments of the *AB80*,

Cab-1, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers with strong mutational sensitivity (Figure 2 and Figure

3A). We then used the measured enhancer strength in the light for all possible single-

nucleotide substitution variants in these regions to generate sequence logo plots, which

show position-specific nucleotide preferences associated with enhancer strength. All but

one of the motifs generated in this way matched known transcription factor binding sites

(Figure 3, B–D). Putative binding sites for MYB family transcription factors are found in

AB80 regions a and d, in *Cab-1* regions b and c, and in *rbcS-E9* regions b, c, and e. A

G-box motif, a potential binding site for bHLH and bZip transcription factors (O'Malley et

al., 2016), is found in *AB80* region b and *rbcS-E9* region a. A putative binding site for

TCP family transcription factors is found in *Cab-1* region a. Although no matching

transcription factor binding motif was found for *AB80* region c and *Cab-1* region d, both

regions contain a mutation-sensitive CCAAT sequence which could be a target of

Nuclear Factor Y transcription factors (Gnesutta et al., 2019). Similarly, *rbcS-E9* region

d contains a TGTGG pentanucleotide which could be a target of the *CONSTANS*

transcription factor and related CCT transcription factors, which form hetero-trimers with

Nuclear Factor Y transcription factors (Tiwari et al., 2010; Gnesutta et al., 2017).

Since the *rbcS-E9* regions a, b, and c also showed mutational sensitivity in the dark,

we performed the same analysis for these regions using enhancer strength

measurements in the dark (Figure 3E). The 'dark' motifs generated for regions b and c

are similar to those found in the light. In contrast, for region a, only the last four

nucleotides of the G-box were highly sensitive to substitutions in the dark, indicating that

this region might be bound by a different transcription factor in the dark than in the light.

Taken together, by leveraging our saturation mutagenesis data, we were able to

assign putative transcription factor binding sites to almost all mutation-sensitive regions

of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* 3′ segments (Figure 3). In contrast, the commonly

employed motif-scanning approach did not yield results for several mutation-sensitive

regions (Supplemental Figure S7). Moreover, only two (the G-box in *rbcS-E9* region a
and the MYB binding site in *rbcS-E9* region b) of the twelve *de novo* motifs based on
the saturation mutagenesis data were also identified with the motif-scanning approach.
To test if the motifs identified by the motif-scanning approach are associated with
enhancer function, we calculated the correlation between the enhancer strength of a
given variant and the score of how well the variant sequence matches the
corresponding transcription factor motif. As a positive control, we first determined this
correlation for the transcription factor binding motifs inferred from the saturation
mutagenesis data. As expected, correlations were high for these motifs. In stark
contrast, the motifs from the motif-scanning approach often showed low correlation
(Figure 3F). Taken together, these results highlight the power of the saturation
mutagenesis-based approach to identify functionally relevant transcription factor binding
sites.
We attribute the failure of the motif-scanning approach to the fact that the three
enhancer sequences analyzed here often deviate from the consensus transcription
factor binding motif by one or two nucleotides. Suboptimal transcription factor binding
sites have been observed in animal enhancers, where they ensure precise regulation of
enhancer activity by requiring cooperative transcription factors for efficient binding
(Farley et al., 2015, 2016). Saturation mutagenesis detects the relevance of such
suboptimal motifs by sampling all possible nucleotides.

The *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers are regulated by the
circadian clock

The *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers contain putative binding sites for MYB
family transcription factors, which have been implicated in the regulation of multiple
biological processes, including the circadian clock (Carré and Kim, 2002; Laosuntisuk et
al., 2023). Since *Cab-1* is regulated by the circadian clock (Fejes et al., 1990), we asked
whether the same is true for the *AB80* and *rbcS-E9* enhancers, and if so, whether we
can pinpoint the sequence motifs that mediate this circadian regulation. To address
these questions, we used Plant STARR-seq to measure the activity of all single-
nucleotide variants of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers in constant light over a

time course of 24 hours, with samples taken every 6 hours (Figure 4A). Consistent with

the hypothesis that the circadian clock affects the activity of these enhancers, the

correlation between Plant STARR-seq samples was highest for samples obtained 24

hours apart from each other and lowest for samples separated by 12 hours

(Supplemental Figure S8).

The activity of all three enhancers was influenced by the circadian clock. The *AB80*

and *Cab-1* 3′ enhancer segments showed greatest activity shortly after mid-day (ZT

~10), when their enhancer strength was approximately 60–100% higher than at its

lowest point (ZT ~22). In contrast, the *rbcS-E9* 3′ enhancer segment was strongest

close to midnight (ZT 19), and its enhancer strength dropped to approximately 40% of

its maximum during the day (Figure 4B).

Next, we sought to identify mutations in the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* 3′ enhancer

segments that disrupt their circadian regulation. We found that the amplitude of the

circadian oscillation in enhancer strength remained largely unchanged across all single-

nucleotide enhancer variants in our library (Figure 4C; Supplemental Figure S9–

Supplemental Figure S12; Supplemental Data Set 2). Nearly all enhancer variants

showed activity profiles across time points that matched their corresponding wild-type

enhancer, especially when variants with very low and hence noisy enhancer strength

values were excluded from the analysis (Figure 4D). Consistent with the observed lack

of circadian cycle-specific variant effects, variant effects measured in this experiment

correlated well with those measured in long-day light/dark cycles (Figure 4C;

Supplemental Figure S8B). In summary, the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers are

regulated by the circadian clock, and this regulation is robustly encoded in their

sequence, as individual single-nucleotide mutations did not abolish it. The observed

robustness of the circadian regulation is likely due to the presence of multiple binding

sites for transcription factors controlled by the circadian clock in each enhancer. Further

experiments are needed to test this hypothesis.

Epistatic interactions between mutations in adjacent mutation-sensitive regions

Given the observed differences in activity caused by the same mutations when present in the 5' vs. 3' enhancer segment of the three enhancers, we hypothesized that the mutation-sensitive regions interact in a cooperative manner. To test this hypothesis, we looked for epistatic interactions between pairs of mutations in mutation-sensitive regions. In the absence of cooperativity, the change in enhancer strength relative to the wild-type enhancer caused by two mutations should equal the sum of the changes observed for the corresponding single mutations. In contrast, epistatic interactions between individual mutations would lead to less reduction in enhancer strength than expected based on the single mutation effects.

We created a Plant STARR-seq library containing single-nucleotide deletion variants of the *AB80* (19 deletions), *Cab-1* (32 deletions), and *rbcS-E9* (25 deletions) 3' enhancer segments, as well as all possible variants containing a combination of two of these deletions within the same enhancer segment (Figure 5A). The enhancer strength of the single-nucleotide deletion variants in this small library correlated well with the values measured in the comprehensive single-nucleotide variant library (Supplemental Figure S13A).

We compared the strength of the enhancer variants carrying two deletions to predictions based on the additive strength of the two single deletions and found strong concordance overall (Figure 5B). When tested in the light, however, several variants with pairs of deletions showed greater enhancer strength than predicted (Figure 5B). In these cases, the two deletions tended to be relatively close to each other (8-20 bp; deletion pairs with a distance of less than 8 bp were excluded from this analysis). The same analysis for the *rbcS-E9* enhancer in the dark found fewer deletion pairs with epistatic interactions than in the light (Figure 5C). The strength of the *AB80* and *Cab-1* enhancers in the dark is too low to draw reliable conclusions from this analysis.

Taken together, we observed epistatic interactions between deletions in mutation-sensitive regions of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers. The effect of these interactions dissipated over distance and was most pronounced in the light.

The number, spacing, and order of mutation-sensitive regions affects enhancer strength

We selected 20 short (17–47 bp) fragments of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers that span one to three mutation-sensitive regions to address how the number, spacing and order of mutation-sensitive regions affect enhancer strength. We also selected two control fragments, one derived from a mutation-insensitive region of the *Cab-1* enhancer and another from a randomly shuffled version of the *AB80* fragment d. Individual fragments as well as synthetic enhancers (combinations of two or three fragments) were cloned upstream of the 35S minimal promoter, and their enhancer strength in the light and dark was measured with Plant STARR-seq (Figure 6A; Supplemental Data Set 3). The individual fragments showed little to no enhancer activity in either condition (Figure 6B), consistent with our finding on cooperativity of mutation-sensitive regions. To systematically compare the enhancer strength of the individual enhancer fragments to the results of the saturation mutagenesis, we used the area under the curve in the mutational sensitivity plots (Figure 2) as a proxy for how much a fragment contributes to the strength of the full-length enhancer. In the light, there was no correlation between the strength of the enhancer fragments and their respective area under the curve observed in the saturation mutagenesis. In contrast, these metrics were well correlated in the dark (Figure 6C).

Most synthetic enhancers showed only weak enhancer activity (Figure 6B), indicating that simply combining mutation-sensitive regions is not sufficient for cooperative interactions. To test if the spacing of mutation-sensitive regions affects enhancer activity, we compared the strength of enhancer fragments spanning two such regions (with both regions present at the same distance as in the wild-type enhancer; named ab, bc, de; Figure 6D) to synthetic enhancers composed of the two individual fragments (with altered spacing between the mutation-sensitive regions; named a+b, b+c, d+e; Figure 6E). In almost all cases, the fragment spanning two mutation-sensitive regions was stronger than the combination of the individual fragments (Figure 6, F and G; Supplemental Figure S14). In addition to the spacing, the order of enhancer fragments

also affected the strength of the resulting synthetic enhancers, and this effect was

stronger in the light (Figure 6, F–H).

In summary, the activity of the full-length enhancers is the result of cooperative

interactions between their constituent mutation-sensitive regions, in particular in the

light. This interpretation is supported by the observation that the enhancer strength of

the combinations of mutation-sensitive regions depends on their spacing and order. In

contrast, the mutation-sensitive regions of the *rbcS-E9* enhancer function largely

independently and additively in the dark. Because we analyzed only three plant

enhancers, it remains to be tested how generalizable our findings are.

Enhancer fragments can be used to design synthetic enhancers

Although many of the synthetic enhancers created by combining fragments of the

AB80, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers were inactive (940 enhancers), more than half of

them showed activity in at least one condition (1,364 enhancers with $\log_2$[enhancer

strength] > 1; Figure 7A). Of the active synthetic enhancers, most showed highest

strength in the dark (728 enhancers). In contrast, only 203 synthetic enhancers were

active specifically in the light, despite being comprised largely of mutation-sensitive

regions found in the light. Finally, 433 synthetic enhancers were active in both the light

and the dark. We validated these results by retesting a subset of approximately 400

synthetic enhancers in a separate library (Supplemental Figure S13B). Moreover, we

measured the activity of 11 synthetic enhancers in stable *Arabidopsis* lines using the

dual-luciferase assay (Figure 7B) and observed strong correlation with the enhancer

strengths measured by Plant STARR-seq (Figure 7C).

When analyzing the composition of the synthetic enhancers, we found that dark-

activated and constitutive synthetic enhancers often contained fragments of *rbcS-E9*,

while inactive and light-activated synthetic enhancers often contained fragments of

AB80 and *Cab-1*. Many (57%) dark-activated synthetic enhancers contained at least

one copy of *rbcS-E9* region b. Light-activated synthetic enhancers tended to contain

Cab-1 regions b – e and *AB80* regions b and c, but without clear preference for either

region. Finally, constitutive synthetic enhancers commonly contained *rbcS-E9* regions a

– b. These results are consistent with the condition-specific mutational sensitivity of

these enhancers and enhancer regions.

Lastly, we asked if the strength of a given synthetic enhancer can be predicted based

on the strength of its constituent fragments, despite the observed cooperativity in the

light. A simple linear model based on the enhancer strength of the 22 individual

enhancer fragments was able to predict the strength of synthetic enhancers with high

accuracy (Figure 7D). Consistent with our cooperativity results, the model performed

best when applied to measurements obtained in the dark (R^2 = 0.84), but it also showed

predictive power in the light (R^2 = 0.65). A similar model that predicted the light-

responsiveness of the synthetic enhancers showed somewhat lower accuracy

(R^2 = 0.42; Supplemental Figure S15). In short, a relatively small number of well-

characterized enhancer fragments is sufficient to create a diverse set of short (less than

150 bp) synthetic enhancers with condition-specific activity.

Discussion

In this study, we used Plant STARR-seq to characterize the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9*

enhancers under two different light regimes. We observed that, in the light, the activity

of the three enhancers is influenced by their grammar and by cooperative interactions

between constituent functional regions defined by mutational sensitivity. Thus, these

plant enhancers appear to show enhanceosome features in the light. Enhanceosomes

in animal cells contain dense arrays of transcription factor binding sites in specific

orientation, spacing, and order that together recruit transcription factor complexes

(Thanos and Maniatis, 1995; Panne, 2008); full activity requires cooperative binding of

all complex members. In the dark, the three plant enhancers show stronger

resemblance to billboard or transcription factor collective enhancers, with reduced

dependency on grammar and cooperativity.

Because of the small number of plant enhancers tested, we cannot conclude whether

enhancer activity in the light generally relies more on cooperativity than activity in the

dark. It is tempting, however, to speculate that enhancers that respond to stimuli may

adhere more to an enhanceosome model because they need to integrate multiple

environmental signals. This integration, which is critical for plant growth and

development, would be expected to involve multiple different transcription factors acting

in concert. However, we presently lack such transcription factor binding data in our

assay.

We identify regions important for enhancer activity and demonstrate that these

regions harbor putative binding sites for transcription factors. A previous study identified

several regions of the *Cab-1* enhancer that are protected from DNase I digestion in the

presence of a nuclear extract from light-grown tobacco (Gotor et al., 1993). These

DNase I-protected regions overlap with the mutation-sensitive regions of *Cab-1*

identified here, supporting the hypothesis that mutation-sensitive regions are bound by

transcription factors *in planta*.

As transcription factors of the same family often bind to highly similar motifs

(O'Malley et al., 2016; Jores et al., 2021; Zenker et al., 2023), we cannot pinpoint the

specific family member(s) binding to a given site. Nonetheless, our results point to an

important role of MYB family transcription factors in generating enhancer activity of the

AB80, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers in the light and in the dark. While it might seem

counterintuitive that the same transcription factors are recruited to enhancers that

function in different conditions (light or dark) and via different models (enhanceosome or

billboard), similar observations have been made in *Drosophila melanogaster* (Liu and

Posakony, 2012).

Our results highlight the crucial role that enhancer grammar can play in determining

enhancer strength. However, future studies will be required to decipher in-depth the

rules of how the order, spacing and orientation of transcription factor binding sites

affects activity or if such rules even exist. This knowledge is crucial for the rational *de*

novo design of highly specific enhanceosome enhancers, which is not possible to date.

As an alternative, we demonstrate that enhancer fragments with known activity can be

combined in an additive, billboard-like fashion to build synthetic enhancers with high

activity and condition-specificity. The success of this approach is rooted in the

hierarchical structure of enhancers (Fromental et al., 1988; Ondek et al., 1988). At the

base level, enhancers consist of transcription factor binding sites (called "enhansons" in

the 1988 studies) that are combined with an optimized grammar to form short "proto-

enhancers" or "enhancer elements." These proto-enhancers are then combined with a
more flexible grammar to form full-length enhancers.
This study showcases the power of Plant STARR-seq to characterize enhancers at
nucleotide resolution. A similar approach could be used to characterize other *cis*-
regulatory elements such as promoters, silencers, or insulators. However, the design
and interpretation of Plant STARR-seq experiments has limitations. First, Plant STARR-
seq is best suited for highly efficient plant transformation systems that enable high
coverage of the tested sequences. Thus far, this efficiency is possible only in transient
assays in a few species such as tobacco and maize, and only in a few tissues (Jores et
al., 2020, 2021). As implemented currently, Plant STARR-seq misses most tissue- and
species-specific effects, and it cannot replicate the endogenous genome and chromatin
context. Second, Plant STARR-seq relies on array synthesis to generate large libraries
of candidate regulatory elements. Because accurate array synthesis is currently limited
to short sequences, Plant STARR-seq cannot detect long-range regulatory interactions.
These two limitations can be overcome by improved plant transformation protocols and
improved technologies for the accurate synthesis or assembly of long test sequences.
Furthermore, improved methods for plant genome engineering will enable researchers
to validate their findings in the context of native plant genomes.

Material and methods

Library design and construction

The full-length *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers and their 169-bp 3′ and 5′
segments as well as the 35S enhancer were PCR amplified from pZS*11_4enh
(Addgene no. 149423; https://www.addgene.org/149423/; Jores et al., 2020). The
sequences of all oligonucleotides used for cloning and sequencing are included in
Supplemental Data Set 4.
Single-nucleotide and double-deletion variants of the three plant enhancers with 15-
bp flanking sequences (5′ TAACTCGCCTCGATC and 3′ CCGTGACAGGTCATT for
AB80; 5′ ACATGGGGGATCATG and 3′ GCATTAGCCAGTCTG for *Cab-1*; 5′
GCTCCAGTTCCCAAC and 3′ GATCGTCCAGTCTGA for *rbcS-E9*) for amplification
were ordered as an oligonucleotide array from Twist Bioscience.

Enhancers fragments (Figure 6A) with 5′ GTGATG overhangs and their reverse-

complements with 5′ CATCAC overhangs were ordered as oligonucleotides, annealed,

and 5′ phosphorylated with T4 Polynucleotide Kinase (NEB). The fragments were mixed

with Golden Gate cloning adaptors (5′ adapter: GAGAGGGTCTCCACTC and

CATCACGAGTGGAGACCCTCTC; 3′ adapter: GTGATGAGGACGAGACCCTCTC and

GAGAGGGTCTCGTCCT; annealed and 5′ phosphorylated) and ligated with T4 DNA

ligase. The ligation products were size-selected to exclude constructs over 150 bp.

Enhancer fragment combinations for the validation library were ordered as an

oligonucleotide array from Twist Bioscience.

All libraries used in this study were constructed using pPSup (Addgene no. 149416;

https://www.addgene.org/149416/; Jores et al., 2020) as the base plasmid. The

plasmid's T-DNA region harbors a phosphinothricin resistance gene (BlpR) and a GFP

reporter construct terminated by the poly(A) site of the *Arabidopsis thaliana* ribulose

bisphosphate carboxylase small chain 1A gene. The 35S minimal promoter followed by

the synthetic 5′ UTR synJ (ACACGCTGGAATTCTAGTATACTAAACC; Kanoria and

Burma, 2012), an ATG start codon and a 15-bp random barcode

(VNNVNNVNNVNNVNN; V = A, C, or G) was cloned in front of the second codon of

GFP by Golden Gate cloning (Engler et al., 2008) using BbsI-HF (NEB). Enhancers,

enhancer variants, and enhancer fragment combinations were cloned upstream of the

35S minimal promoter by Golden Gate cloning using BsaI-HFv2 (NEB). The resulting

libraries were bottlenecked to yield 10–20 barcodes per enhancer.

The base plasmid pDL for dual-luciferase constructs was created from pPSup after

the 35S minimal promoter and synJ 5′ UTR were inserted into the BbsI Golden Gate

site. The GFP reporter gene was replaced with nanoluciferase by Gibson Assembly. A

second round of Gibson Assembly was used to insert the luciferase gene driven by the

Arabidopsis UBQ10 promoter (TAIR10 Chr4:2716532–2718558) and terminated by the

35S terminator between the T-DNA left border and the BlpR gene. The nanoluciferase

coding sequence and the 35S terminator were ordered as synthesized DNA fragments.

The luciferase coding sequence was amplified from pGreen_dualluc_3'UTR_sensor

(Addgene no. 55206; https://www.addgene.org/55206/; Liu et al., 2014) and the *UBQ10*

promoter was amplified for *Arabidopsis* Col-0 genomic DNA. The assembled plasmid

pDL was deposited at Addgene (Addgene no. 208978;

https://www.addgene.org/208978/). The 3′ segments of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9*

enhancers and the synthetic enhancers syn1–11 were cloned upstream of the 35S

minimal promoter in pDL by Golden Gate cloning using BsaI-HFv2 (NEB). The synthetic

enhancers were ordered as synthesized DNA fragments.

Plant cultivation and transformation

Tobacco (*Nicotiana benthamiana*) was grown in soil (Sunshine Mix no. 4) at 25°C in a

long-day photoperiod (16 h light and 8 h dark; cool-white fluorescent lights [Philips TL-

D 58 W/840]; intensity 300 µmol m^{-2} s^{-1}). Plants were transformed approximately

3 weeks after germination. For transient transformation of tobacco leaves, enhancer

libraries were introduced into *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* strain GV3101 (harboring the

virulence plasmid pMP90 and the helper plasmid pSoup) by electroporation. An

overnight culture of the transformed *A. tumefaciens* was diluted into 100 ml YEP

medium (1% [w/v] yeast extract and 2% [w/v] peptone) and grown at 28°C for 8 h. A 5-

ml input sample of the cells was collected, and plasmids were isolated from it using the

QIAprep Spin Miniprep Kit (QIAGEN) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The

remaining cells were harvested and resuspended in 100 ml induction medium (M9

medium [3 g/L KH$_2$PO$_4$, 0.5 g/L NaCl, 6.8 g/L Na$_2$HPO$_4$, and 1 g/L NH$_4$Cl] supplemented

with 1% [w/v] glucose, 10 mM MES, pH 5.2, 100 µM CaCl$_2$, 2 mM MgSO$_4$, and

100 µM acetosyringone). After overnight growth, the *Agrobacteria* were harvested,

resuspended in infiltration solution (10 mM MES, pH 5.2, 10 mM MgCl$_2$, 150 µM

acetosyringone, and 5 µM lipoic acid) to an optical density of 1 and infiltrated into

leaves 3 and 4 of six tobacco plants. The plants were further grown for 48 h under

normal conditions (16 h light and 8 h dark) or in the dark before mRNA extraction.

Arabidopsis thaliana Col-0 was grown in soil (Sunshine Mix no. 4) at 20°C in a long-

day photoperiod (16 h light and 8 h dark; cool-white fluorescent lights [Sylvania

FO32/841/ECO 32W]; intensity 100 µmol m^{-2} s^{-1}). For transformation, dual-

luciferase plasmids were introduced into *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* strain GV3101

(harboring the virulence plasmid pMP90 and the helper plasmid pSoup) by

electroporation. Transgenic *Arabidopsis* plants were generated by floral dipping (Clough

and Bent, 1998) and selected for by spraying with a 0.01% Glufosinate solution.

Plant STARR-seq

For all Plant STARR-seq experiments, at least two independent biological replicates

were performed. Different plants and fresh *Agrobacterium* cultures were used for each

biological replicate.

Transiently transformed tobacco leaves were harvested 2 days after infiltration and

partitioned into two batches of 6 leaves each. The leaf batches were frozen in liquid

nitrogen, finely ground with mortar and pestle, and immediately resuspended in 12 mL

TRIzol (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The suspensions from both leaf batches were pooled

and cleared by centrifugation (5 min, 4,000 x g, 4°C). The supernatant was mixed with

5 mL chloroform and centrifuged (15 min, 4,000 x g, 4°C). The upper, aqueous phase

was transferred to a new tube and was washed once more with 5 mL chloroform. The

aqueous phase (approximately 10 mL) was transferred to a new tube, and mixed by

inversion with 10 mL isopropanol and 10 mL high salt buffer (0.8 M sodium citrate, 1.2 M

NaCl). The solution was incubated for 15 min at RT to precipitate the RNA and

centrifuged (30 min, 4,000 x g, 4°C). The pellet was washed in 25 mL ice-cold 70%

ethanol, centrifuged (5 min, 4000 x g, 4°C), and air-dried. The pellet was resuspended

in 2.4 mL of warm (65°C) nuclease-free water and split into two aliquots. From each

aliquot, mRNAs were isolated using 150 µL magnetic Oligo(dT)$_{25}$ beads (Thermo Fisher

Scientific) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Elution was performed with

40 µL 10 mM Tris (pH 7.4) and the eluates from both aliquots were pooled. To remove

DNA contaminations, the mRNA solution was mixed 10 µL DNase I buffer without

MnCl$_2$, 10 µL 100 mM MnCl$_2$, 1 µL RNaseOUT, and 2 µL DNase I (Thermo Fisher

Scientific), and incubated for 1 h at 37°C. To precipitate the mRNA, 1 µL 20 mg/mL

glycogen (Thermo Fisher Scientific), 10 µL ice-cold 8M LiCl and 250 µL ice-cold 100%

ethanol was added. After incubation for 15 min at –80°C, the RNA was pelleted by

centrifugation (20 min, 20,000 x g, 4°C). The pellet was washed with 200 µL ice-cold

70% ethanol, centrifuged (5 min, 20,000 x g, 4°C), air-dried, and resuspended in 100 µL

nuclease-free water. For cDNA synthesis, eight reactions with 11 µL mRNA solution, 1

µL 2 µM GFP-specific reverse transcription primer, and 1 µL 10 mM dNTPs were

incubated at 65°C for 5 min then immediately placed on ice. The reactions were

supplemented with 4 µL 5X SuperScript IV buffer, 1 µL 100 mM DTT, 1 µL RNaseOUT,

and 1 µL SuperScript IV reverse transcriptase (ThermoFisher Scientific). To ensure that

the samples were largely free of DNA contamination, four reactions were used as

controls, where the reverse transcriptase and RNaseOUT were replaced with water.

Reactions were incubated for 10 min at 55°C, followed by 10 min at 80°C. Sets of 4

reactions each were pooled. The cDNA was purified with the Zymo Clean&Concentrate-

5 kit, and eluted in 20 µL 10 mM Tris. The barcode was amplified with 10-20 cycles of

polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and read out by next generation sequencing.

Subassembly and barcode sequencing

Paired-end sequencing on an Illumina NextSeq 550 platform was used to link

enhancers to their respective barcodes. The enhancer region was sequenced using

paired 144-bp reads, and two 15-bp indexing reads were used to sequence the

barcodes. The paired enhancer and barcode reads were assembled using PANDAseq

(version 2.11; Masella et al., 2012). Enhancer-barcode pairs with less than 5 reads and

enhancers with a mutation or truncation were discarded.

For each Plant STARR-seq experiment, barcodes were sequenced using paired-end

reads on an Illumina NextSeq 500, 550, or 2000 system. The paired barcode reads

were assembled using PANDAseq.

Computational methods

The code used for the analysis and to generate the figures is available on GitHub

(https://github.com/tobjores/cooperativity-and-additivity-in-plant-enhancers).

For analysis of the Plant STARR-seq experiments, the reads for each barcode were

counted in the input and cDNA samples. Barcode counts below 5 and barcodes present

in only one replicate were discarded. Barcode counts were normalized to the sum of all

counts in the respective sample. For barcodes, enhancer strength was calculated by

dividing the normalized barcode counts in the cDNA sample by that in the

corresponding input sample. The sum of the normalized counts for all barcodes

associated with a given enhancer, enhancer variant, or enhancer fragment combination

were used to calculate its strength. For each replicate, enhancer strength was

normalized to the median enhancer strength. Unless indicated otherwise, the mean

enhancer strength across all replicates was used for analyses. Spearman and

Pearson's correlation were calculated using base R (version 4.3.1).

To identify putative transcription factor binding sites within the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and

rbcS-E9 enhancers, we used the universalmotif package (version 1.18.1) in R to scan

the enhancer sequences for matches on each strand to known transcription factor

binding motifs (obtained from Jores et al., 2021). Scores for how well a variant

sequence matches a transcription factor binding motif were calculated using the

score_match() function of the universalmotif package. For the generation of sequence

logo plots for mutation-sensitive regions we adapted previously published approaches

(Andrilenas et al., 2018; Ireland et al., 2020). The enhancer strength of all variants

within a given mutation-sensitive region was normalized to the strength of the wild-type

variant, scaled by a factor β, and turned into an information content matrix using the

create_motif() function of the universalmotif package. The scaling factor β was chosen

such that the final motif had an average per-base information content of 1. The

generated motifs were compared to known transcription factor binding motifs using the

compare_motifs() function of the universalmotif package.

For the generation of circadian rhythm curves, a linear model was fitted to the time

course Plant STARR-seq data using the lm() function in R with the formula:

$\log2(\text{enhancer strength}) = \sin(2 \cdot \pi \cdot \text{time} / 24) + \cos(2 \cdot \pi \cdot \text{time} / 24)$, where time refers

to the time in hours when the samples were harvested.

To predict the strength of synthetic enhancers generated by combining enhancer

fragments, a liner model was fitted to Plant STARR-seq data using the lm() function in R

with the formula: $\log2(\text{enhancer strength}) = \log2(\text{enhancer strength fragment 3}) +$

$\log2(\text{enhancer strength fragment 2}) + \log2(\text{enhancer strength fragment 1})$, where

log2(enhancer strength fragment 1–3) is the enhancer strength of the corresponding

fragment when tested individually. Fragments are numbered by increasing distance

from the minimal promoter (fragment 1 is the fragment closest to the promoter, fragment

3 the most distal one). For combinations of two fragments, log2(enhancer strength

fragment 3) was set to 0.

Dual-luciferase assay

Transgenic *Arabidopsis* lines (T2 generation) with dual-luciferase constructs were grown

in soil for 3 weeks. A cork borer (4 mm diameter) was used to collect a total of 3 leaf

discs from the third and fourth leaf of the plants. The leaf discs were transferred to

1.5 mL tubes filled with approximately 10 glass beads (1 mm diameter), snap-frozen in

liquid nitrogen, and disrupted by shaking twice for 5 sec in a Silamat S6 (Ivoclar)

homogenizer. The leaf disc debris was resuspended in 100 µL 1X Passive Lysis Buffer

(Promega). The solution was cleared by centrifugation (5 min, 20,000 x g, RT) and

10 µL of the supernatant were mixed with 90 µL 1X passive lysis buffer. Luciferase and

nanoluciferase activity were measured on a Biotek Synergy H1 plate reader using the

Promega Nano-Glo Dual-Luciferase Reporter Assay System according to the

manufacturer's instructions. Specifically, 10 µL of the leaf extracts were combined with

75 µL ONE-Glo EX Reagent, mixed for 3 min at 425 rpm, and incubated for 2 min

before measuring luciferase activity. Subsequently, 75 µL NanoDLR Stop&Glo Reagent

were added to them sample. After 3 min mixing at 425 rpm and 12 min incubation,

nanoluciferase activity was measured. Three independent biological replicates were

performed.

Accession Numbers

The code used for the analysis and to generate the figures is available on GitHub

(https://github.com/tobjores/cooperativity-and-additivity-in-plant-enhancers). All barcode

sequencing reads were deposited in the National Center for Biotechnology Information

(NCBI) Sequence Read Archive under the BioProject accession PRJNA1015372

(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/bioproject/1015372/). The sequences for the enhancers

can be obtained from NCBI (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nuccore/) using the following

accessions: V00141 (35S), X03074 (AB80), X05823 (Cab-1), and X00806 (rbcS-E9).

Supplemental Data

Supplemental Figure S1. Enhancer strength and light-responsiveness is orientation-independent

Supplemental Figure S2. Plant STARR-seq yields highly reproducible results

Supplemental Figure S3. The dual-luciferase assay cannot detect light-responsive enhancer activity

Supplemental Figure S4. Few single-nucleotide mutations have a strong effect on enhancer strength

Supplemental Figure S5. Saturation mutagenesis reveals mutation-sensitive patches in plant enhancers

Supplemental Figure S6. Effects of mutations in the overlap region of the 5′ and 3′ enhancer segments are more similar in the dark

Supplemental Figure S7. Mutation-sensitive regions contain few strong matches to known transcription factor binding motifs

Supplemental Figure S8. Strong correlation between Plant STARR-seq samples obtained 24 hours apart from each other

Supplemental Figure S9. Saturation mutagenesis maps of the *AB80* enhancer do not change much over time in constant light

Supplemental Figure S10. Saturation mutagenesis maps of the *Cab-1* enhancer do not change much over time in constant light

Supplemental Figure S11. Saturation mutagenesis maps of the *rbcS-E9* enhancer do not change much over time in constant light

Supplemental Figure S12. Mutation-sensitive regions of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers are conserved over time in constant light

Supplemental Figure S13. Plant STARR-seq experiments are reproducible across

libraries

Supplemental Figure S14. Correct spacing between mutation-sensitive regions is

required for full activity

Supplemental Figure S15. A linear model can predict the light-responsiveness of

synthetic enhancers

Supplemental Data Set 1. Enhancer strength of single-nucleotide variants of the *AB80*,

Cab-1, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers in the light or dark

Supplemental Data Set 2. Enhancer strength of single-nucleotide variants of the *AB80*,

Cab-1, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers in time course experiment

Supplemental Data Set 3. Enhancer strength of combinations of fragments of the

AB80, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers in the light or dark

Supplemental Data Set 4. Oligonucleotides used in this study

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Author contributions

693
694 All authors conceived and interpreted experiments; T.J., J.T., and N.A.M performed

695 experiments; T.J., and J.T. analyzed the data; T.J., S.F., and C.Q. prepared the

696 manuscript and figures. All authors read and revised the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Figure legends

Figure 1 Enhancers from photosynthesis genes show light-responsive activity. **A** and **B**, Full-length (FL) enhancers, as well as 169-bp long segments from their 5′ or 3′ end, of the *Pisum sativum AB80* and *rbcS-E9* genes and the *Triticum aestivum Cab-1* gene were cloned upstream of the 35S minimal promoter driving the expression of a barcoded GFP reporter gene (**A**). All constructs were pooled and the viral 35S enhancer was added as an internal control. The pooled enhancer library was subjected to Plant STARR-seq in tobacco leaves with plants grown for 2 days in normal light/dark cycles (+ light) or completely in the dark (– light) prior to RNA extraction (**B**). Enhancer strength was normalized to a control construct without an enhancer ($\log_2$ set to 0). **C**, Light-responsiveness ($\log_2[\text{enhancer strength}^{\text{light}}/\text{enhancer strength}^{\text{dark}}]$) was determined for the indicated enhancer segments. **D**, Transgenic Arabidopsis lines were generated with T-DNAs harboring a constitutively expressed luciferase (Luc) gene and a nanoluciferase (NanoLuc) gene under control of a 35S minimal promoter coupled to the 35S enhancer or the 3′ segments of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, or *rbcS-E9* enhancers. **E**, Nanoluciferase activity was measured in 5 T2 plants from these lines and normalized to the activity of luciferase. The NanoLuc/Luc ratio was normalized to a control construct without an enhancer (none; $\log_2$ set to 0). **F**, The mean NanoLuc/Luc ratio was compared to the mean enhancer strength determined by STARR-seq. Pearson's R^2, Spearman's ρ, and number (n) of enhancers are indicated. A linear regression line is shown as a dashed line. Error bars represent the 95% confidence interval. Box plots in **B**, **C**, and **E** represent the median (center line), upper and lower quartiles (box limits), 1.5× interquartile range (whiskers), and outliers (points) for all corresponding barcodes (**B** and **C**) or plant lines (**E**) from two (**B** and **C**) or three (**E**) independent replicates. Numbers at the bottom of each box plot indicate the number of samples in each group.

Figure 2 The *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers contain multiple mutation-sensitive regions. **A**–**C**, All possible single-nucleotide substitution, deletion, and insertion variants of the 5′ and 3′ segments of the *AB80* (**A**), *Cab-1* (**B**), and *rbcS-E9* (**C**) enhancers were subjected to Plant STARR-seq in tobacco plants grown in normal light/dark cycles (light) or completely in the dark (dark) for two days prior to RNA extraction. Enhancer strength

was normalized to the wild-type variant (log$_2$ set to 0). A sliding average (window size =

6 bp) of the mean enhancer strength for all variants at a given position is shown. The

shaded area indicates the region where the 5′ and 3′ segments overlap. Mutation-

sensitive regions in the 3′ enhancer segments are indicated by shaded rectangles

labeled a–e.

Figure 3 Mutation-sensitive regions harbor transcription factor binding sites. **A**, 4 to 5

mutation-sensitive regions (shaded rectangles; labeled a–e) were defined for the 3′

segments of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers. The mutational sensitivity plots

are reproduced from Figure 2. **B**–**E**, Sequence logo plots were generated from the

enhancer strength in the light (**B**–**D**) or dark (**E**) of all possible single-nucleotide

substitution variants within the indicated mutation-sensitive regions of the *AB80* (**B**),

Cab-1 (**C**), or *rbcS-E9* (**D** and **E**) enhancers. The sequence of the wild-type enhancer

and the position along it is shown on the x axis. Letters with dark colors in the logo plot

represent wild-type bases. The sequence logos for each region were compared to

known transcription factor binding motifs and significant matches are shown below the

plots. **F**, For each transcription factor binding motif matching a sequence logo plots

derived from the saturation mutagenesis data in the light (mutagenesis; see **B**–**D**) or

identified by the motif-scanning approach (scanning; see Supplemental Figure S7), the

correlation (Pearson's *r*) between the strength of an enhancer variant and the score of

how well the variant sequence matches this motif is plotted as points. The lines

represent the average correlation for all motifs of a given enhancer.

Figure 4 Circadian oscillation is robustly encoded in the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9*

enhancers. **A**, All possible single-nucleotide variants of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9*

enhancers were subjected to Plant STARR-seq in tobacco leaves. On the morning of

the third day after transformation (ZT 0), the plants were shifted to constant light.

Leaves were harvested for RNA extraction starting at mid-day (ZT 8) and in 6 hour

intervals (ZT 14, 20, 26, and 32) afterwards. **B**, A sine wave with a period of 24 h was

fitted to the enhancer strength of a given variant across all sampled time points. The

fitted line is plotted together with the measured data points for the wild-type enhancers.

The equilibrium point of the curves was set to 0. The amplitude is shown as a two-sided
arrow at the time of highest enhancer strength (peak time). The goodness-of-fit (R^2) is
indicated. The shaded gray area represents the timing of the dark period if the plants
had not been shifted to constant light. **C** and **D**, Histograms of the difference between
the amplitude (**C**) and peak time (**D**) of each single-nucleotide variant relative to the
wild-type enhancer. For comparison, the difference in enhancer strength at ZT 8 is also
shown in **C**. Variants with a below average goodness-of-fit are grayed out in **D**. Only
data for the 3′ enhancer segments is shown.

Figure 5 Epistatic interactions between single-nucleotide deletions. **A**–**C**, Selected
single-nucleotide deletion variants (**A**; Δ1, Δ2, Δ3, …) of the 3′ segment of the *AB80*,
Cab-1, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers and all possible combinations with two of these
deletions (**A**; Δ1+Δ2, Δ1+Δ3, Δ2+Δ3, …) were subjected to Plant STARR-seq in tobacco
plants grown in normal light/dark cycles (**B**) or completely in the dark (**C**) for two days
prior to RNA extraction. For each pair of deletions, the expected enhancer strength
based on the sum of the effects of the individual deletions (additive model) is plotted
against the measured enhancer strength. The color of the points represents the
distance between the two deletions in a pair.

Figure 6 The number, spacing, and order of mutation-sensitive regions affects
enhancer strength. **A**, Fragments of the *AB80*, *Cab-1*, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers spanning
1–3 mutation-sensitive regions (shaded rectangles; labeled a–e, ab, abc, bc, de) as well
as a control fragment (ctrl) from a mutation-insensitive region in *Cab-1* and a shuffled
version of the *AB80* fragment d were ordered as oligonucleotides. These fragments
were randomly combined to create synthetic enhancers with up to three fragments
which were then subjected to Plant STARR-seq in tobacco plants grown in normal
light/dark cycles (light) or completely in the dark (dark) for two days prior to RNA
extraction. The mutational sensitivity plots are reproduced from Figure 2. **B**, Violin plots
of the strength of the synthetic enhancers grouped by the number of contained
fragments. **C**, For each enhancer fragment, the area under the curve (AUC) in the
mutational sensitivity plots was calculated and plotted against the fragment's enhancer
strength. AUCs in the dark or light for *rbcS-E9* fragments c and d, respectively, are

shown in **A**. Pearson's R^2, Spearman's ρ, and number (*n*) of enhancer fragments are

indicated. A linear regression line is shown as a dashed line. **D–G**, Plots of the strength

of enhancer fragments (**D**) or fragment combinations (separated by a + sign and shown

in the order in which they appear in the construct; **E**) in three replicates (points) and the

mean strength (lines). Enhancer strength was determined using tobacco plants grown in

the light (**F**) or dark (**G**) prior to RNA extraction. **H**, Violin plots of the difference in

enhancer strength between synthetic enhancers harboring the same two enhancer

fragments but in different order. The *p*-value from a two-sided Wilcoxon rank-sum test

comparing light and dark results is indicated (*p*). Violin plots in **B** and **H** represent the

kernel density distribution and the box plots inside represent the median (center line),

upper and lower quartiles and 1.5× interquartile range (whiskers) for all corresponding

synthetic enhancers. Numbers at the bottom of each violin indicate the number of

elements in each group. Enhancer strength in **B–G** was normalized to a control

construct without an enhancer ($\log_2$ set to 0).

Figure 7 Enhancer fragments can be used to build condition-specific synthetic

enhancers. **A**, Plot of the strength of synthetic enhancers created by randomly

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Cab-1, and *rbcS-E9* enhancers (see Figure 6A) as measured by Plant STARR-seq in

the light or dark. The synthetic enhancers were grouped into four categories: inactive,

$\log_2$(enhancer strength) ≤ 1 in both conditions; constitutive, similar strength in both

conditions; light-activated, at least two-fold more active in the light; dark-activated, at

least two-fold more active in the dark. The number (*n*) of synthetic enhancers in each

category is indicated. **B**, Dual-luciferase reporter constructs (see Figure 1D) were

created for 11 synthetic enhancers (syn1–11). Nanoluciferase activity was measured in

at least 4 T2 plants from these lines and normalized to the activity of luciferase. The

NanoLuc/Luc ratio was normalized to a control construct without an enhancer (none;

$\log_2$ set to 0). Box plots are as defined in Figure 1E. **C**, The mean NanoLuc/Luc ratio

was compared to the mean enhancer strength determined by STARR-seq. A linear

regression line is shown as a dashed line. Error bars represent the 95% confidence

interval. The constituent fragments of the synthetic enhancers are indicated with

fragments separated by a + sign. The first letter indicates the enhancer from which the

fragment is derived (A, *AB80*; C, *Cab-1*; R, *rbcS-E9*) and the lowercase letters

represent the fragment name. **D**, A linear model was built to predict the strength of the

synthetic enhancers based on the strength of the constituent individual fragments.

Hexbin plots (color represents the count of points in each hexagon) of the correlation

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