

Essential Questions

(description)

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Have no simple "right" answer; they are meant to be argued.

Essential Questions yield inquiry and argument—a variety of plausible (and arguable) responses, not straightforward facts that end the matter. They serve as doorways into focused yet lively inquiry and research. They should *uncover* rather than cover the subject's controversies, puzzles, and perspectives. They are intended to result in conclusions drawn by the learner, not recited facts. For example, Does art reflect culture or help shape it? Can we look but not see? Why do "seers" see what the rest of us don't? Does the artist see more clearly or look elsewhere?

Are designed to provoke and sustain student inquiry, while focusing learning and final performances.

Essential Questions work best when they are designed and edited to be thought provoking to students, engaging them in sustained, focused inquiries that culminate in important performance. Such questions often involve the counterintuitive, the visceral, the whimsical, the controversial, the provocative. For example, Is the Internet dangerous for kids? Are censorship and democracy compatible? Does food that is good for you have to taste bad? Why write? Students develop and deepen their understanding of important ideas as they explore these questions.

Often address the conceptual or philosophical foundations of a discipline.

Essential Questions reflect the most historically important issues, problems, and debates in a field of study. For example, Is history inevitably biased? What is a proof? Nature or nurture? By examining such questions, students are engaged in thinking like an expert.

Raise other important questions.

Thought-provoking Essential Questions are naturally generative. They lead to other important questions within, and sometimes across, subject boundaries. For example, In nature, do only the strong survive? leads to What do we mean by "strong"? Are insects strong (since they are survivors)? What does it mean to be psychologically strong? Inquiries into human biology and the physics of physiology also follow.

Naturally and appropriately recur.

The same important questions are asked and asked again throughout one's learning and in the history of the field. For example, What makes a great book great? Are the Harry Potter novels great books? These questions can be productively examined and reexamined by 1st graders as well as college students. Over time, student responses become more sophisticated, nuanced, well-reasoned and supported as their understandings deepen.

Stimulate vital, ongoing rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons.

Essential questions challenge our unexamined assumptions, the inevitable simplification of our earlier learning, and the arguments we may unthinkingly take for granted. They force us to ask deep questions about the nature, origin, and extent of our understanding. For example, In light of fractions, place value, irrationals, and negative square roots—what is a number? Is it "democratic" to have an electoral college? What IS a friend? Can the enemy of my enemy be my friend? What is a story, if a story has no clear plot or moral? Is history more of a story than a science? What are the implications for studying history, if so?

Types of Questions



Overarching Questions

These questions point beyond the particulars of a unit to the larger, transferable Big Ideas and enduring understandings. Practically speaking, the specific topics, events, or texts of the unit are typically not mentioned in the framing of overarching questions. For example, Is science fiction great literature? is an overarching question for any unit on a specific text such as *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

Topical Questions

These questions are subject- and topic-specific. Topical questions frame a unit of study. They guide the exploration of Big Ideas and processes within particular subjects. For example, What aspects of *Stranger in a Strange Land* are plausible? guides inquiry within a specific literature unit. This unit question links to the overarching question, How "true" is a fictional story? This question is addressed within other English and Language Arts units.

Samples

Art

- In what ways does art reflect culture as well as shape it?
- How do artists choose tools, techniques, and materials to express their ideas?

Unit on masks

- What do masks and their use reveal about the culture?
- What tools, techniques, and materials are used in creating masks from different cultures?

Literature

- What makes a great story?
- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?

Unit on mysteries

- What is unique about the mystery genre?
- How do great mystery writers hook and hold their readers?

Science

- How does an organism's structure enable it to survive in its environment?
- How do organisms survive in harsh or changing environments?

Unit on insects

- How do the structure and behavior of insects enable them to survive?
- How do insects survive when their environment changes?

Mathematics

- If axioms are like the rules of the game, when should we change the rules?

Unit on the parallel postulate

- Why is this an axiom if it's so complex?
- What no longer holds true if we deny it?

History and Government

- How do governments balance the rights of individuals with the common good?
- How and why do we provide checks and balances on government power?

Unit on the U.S. Constitution

- In what ways does the Constitution attempt to limit abuse of government powers?
- Does separation of powers (three branches of government) create a deadlock?

Essential Questions—Samples



Arithmetic (numeration)

- What is a number? Why do we have numbers? What if we didn't have numbers?
- Can everything be quantified?

Arts (visual and performing)

- Where do artists get their ideas?
- How does art reflect, as well as shape, culture?

Culinary Arts

- When is it ok to deviate from the recipe?
- What makes a safe kitchen?

Dance

- How and what can we communicate through the language of dance?
- In what ways can motion evoke emotion?

Economics

- What determines value?
- Can macroeconomics inform microeconomics (and vice versa)?

Foreign Language

- What distinguishes a fluent foreigner from a native speaker?
- What can we learn about our own language and culture from studying another?

Geography

- What makes places unique and different?
- How does where we live influence how we live?

Government

- Who should decide?
- How should we balance the rights of individuals with the common good?

Health

- What is healthful living?
- How can a diet be healthy for one person and not another?

Essential Questions—Samples (continued)

Templates

Stage 1

Stage 2

Stage 3

Peer review

Exercises

Process sheets

Glossary

History

- Whose story is it? Is history the story told by the winners?
- What can we learn from the past?

Literature

- What makes a great book?
- Can fiction reveal truth? Should a story teach you something?

Mathematics

- When is the “correct” answer not the best solution?
- What are the limits of mathematical representation and modeling?

Music

- How are sounds and silence organized in various musical forms?
- What roles does music play in the world?

Physical Education and Athletics

- Who is a winner?
- Is pain necessary for progress in athletics? (“No pain, no gain”)

Reading and Language Arts

- What makes a great story?
- How do you read between the lines?
- Why do we punctuate? What if we didn’t have punctuation marks?

Science

- To what extent are science and common sense related?
- How are “form” and “function” related in biology?

Technology

- In what ways can technology enhance expression and communication? In what ways might technology hinder it?
- What are the pros and cons of technological progress?

Writing

- Why write?
- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?
- What is a complete thought?