

What Are Essential Questions?

“To get at matters of deep and enduring understanding we need to use provocative and multilayered questions that reveal the richness and complexities of a subject” (Wiggins and McTighe).

Essential Questions represent enduring questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no response. By connecting material to a significant theme that resonates with the lives of adolescents, essential questions can add relevance and focus to a unit of study. Essential Questions can be used to guide curricular decisions and can provide the backbone for assessments.

| Rational | Mechanical |
|---|---|
| <p>Essential Questions!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are meaningful and worth asking.• Have no right or wrong answers!• Are interesting to students• Engage students in real life problem-solving• Spark our curiosity and sense of wonder• Require a high level of thinking• Answers cannot be found. They must be constructed through textual evidence.• Make students investigators• May inspire investigations that last a lifetime• Can be answered by all students• Are more about learning than teaching• Help students see connections between disciplines | <p>Essential Questions should be...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open ended. Essential Questions cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”; they have no “right” answer.• Made explicit to students. The questions can be written on the board and referred to during discussions and other activities.• Deliberately framed to engage students, using student-friendly language that makes the question relevant and easy-to-understand.• Limited to 2-5 questions per unit.• Connect to students’ lives and past, present or future experiences.• Used to design curriculum – activities and materials should be selected on the basis of how they help students explore the essential questions of the unit.• An integral part of the assessment.• Often teachers’ breakdown Essential Questions into sub-questions or unit questions that are more concrete and topic-specific. |

Example:

Here are some examples of Essential Questions, organized by scope and sequence:

Identity/Culture

- Who am I? What are the various factors that shape identity? In what ways is our identity defined by others?
- How does society influence our identity and the choices we make?
- What does it mean to be “from” a place? How does where we are from influence who we are?
- How do people make distinctions between “us” and “them”? Why do they make these distinctions?
- What is community? How are decisions made about who belongs and who is excluded?
- How does a society integrate immigrants and how do immigrants transform societies?

Historical Justice/Injustice

- What choices do people make in the face of injustice?
- What makes it possible for neighbor to turn against neighbor?
- How is genocide and other acts of mass violence humanly possible?
- What choices do people make that allow collective violence to happen?
- Who decides how laws or rules are applied? How can we ensure that laws and rules are applied to everyone in the same way?
- What are civil rights? Who decides? How can we respond when our civil rights are violated? What can be done to strengthen the civil rights of individuals and groups?
- What is race? How can ideas about race be used and abused? What can be done to counter harmful myths about race?
- How have ideas about race been used to decide who is included and who is excluded?
- What is justice? How can it be achieved?
- What does justice look like after genocide?
- How can individuals and societies remember and commemorate difficult histories? What is the purpose of remembering? What are the consequences for forgetting?
- How do you evaluate the legacy of historical events?

Civic Engagement

- Why do some people standby during times of injustice while others try to do something to stop or prevent injustice?
- What factors influence decision-making in the face of injustice?
- Under what conditions are most people likely to feel more responsible for helping others? What factors reduce feelings of personal responsibility?
- What obstacles keep individuals from getting involved in their communities and larger world? What factors encourage participation?

How Can You Identify a Strong vs. a Weak Essential Question?

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| No | Yes |
| What are the 3 branches of government and what does each one do? | How are the 3 branches of government dependent on each other? |
| Yes | No |
| How can we reduce the chances of a war with Iran? | Why might we go to war with Iran? |
| No | Yes |
| What was America's response to 9/11? | Was the America's response to 9/11 justified? |
| No | Yes |
| What caused 9/11? | Could events surrounding WWI have been one of the root causes of 9/11? |

1) All Essential Question lead to Subsidiary Questions

a) Subsidiary Questions ...

- i) Are smaller questions which help answer essential question
- ii) Lead to student developed questions
- iii) Provide the facts used to answer the essential question
- iv) Are written as "what," "when," "who" questions
- v) Drive a project
- vi) Allow for data collection
- vii) Supply new information for further questioning

How to Write Essential Questions

Begin with Enduring Understandings

- a) Identify the Standards that need to be learned
- b) Convert the Standard(s) into Enduring Understandings, more commonly known as Big Ideas.
- c) Writing Enduring Understandings
 - i) Determine what the students need to understand about this standard
 - ii) Determine the big ideas that the students need to understand beyond this standard
 - iii) Begin each statement with "Students understand that..." and complete the sentence with two or more concepts from your standards
 - iv) Write big ideas in "kid friendly" language so all your students can understand what they will be learning.

Create Essential Questions

- a) Determine how many Essential Questions you will need 1 or 2 for a lesson Between 3 and 5 for a unit of study that ranges 3-12 weeks
- b) Frame your questions in "kid friendly" language. Make them engaging and thought provoking.
- c) Write essential questions with "**how**" or "**why**" instead of "what"
- d) Sequence your questions so they lead naturally from one to another
- e) Post these questions in your room as a learning focus for your students
- f) Remember: If a question is too specific, or could be answered with a few words or a sentence, they are probably not essential questions

| Enduring Understandings – <i>What I want my students to know 30 years from now!</i> | Essential Questions – <i>the essence of what your students will examine and learn in the course of their study</i> |
|--|---|
| Students understand that innovations and technology produce both positive and negative effects. | What problems and solutions do innovations produce? |
| Students understand when different groups migrate to an area changes can have positive and negative effects. | How has immigration affected the social structure of the United states? |
| Students understand that Andrew Jackson's presidency was a turning point in American history. | How has Jacksonian Democracy been consistent or inconsistent with American ideals? |
| Students understand that Nationalism and sectionalism have been competing ideas in American history. | How did the ideas of nationalism clash with ideas of sectionalism? |
| Students understand that multiple causes led to the Civil War. | Was the Civil War avoidable? Why or why not? |

Essential Question Development Checklist

| CHECK LIST | X |
|--|----------|
| Does the question center around a student relevant major issue, problem, concern, or interest? | |
| Does the question probe for deeper meaning? | |
| Does the question set the stage for further questioning? Is the question open-ended? | |
| Is the question non-judgmental? | |
| Is the question meaningful and purposeful? | |
| Does the question appeal to emotions? | |
| Is the question intellectual? | |
| Does the question invite an exploration of ideas and beliefs? | |
| Does the question encourage collaboration? | |
| Does the question have more than one right answer? | |
| Is the question do-able as a project? | |
| Does the question ask the learner to make a decision? <i>Should? Which?</i> | |
| OR | |
| ask the learner to plan a course of action? <i>How? Why? What if?</i> | |
| Is the question framed in "kid friendly" language? | |
| Do you have a reasonable number of questions? 1 or 2 for a lesson; Between 3 and 5 for a unit of study that ranges 3-12 weeks. | |

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ⁱ <http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/essential-questions>

ⁱⁱ Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA