

Essential Questions...



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 straight-forward 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.

- 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. Students develop and deepen their understanding of important ideas as they explore these questions.

- Is the Internet dangerous for kids?
- Are censorship and democracy compatible?
- Does food that is good for you have to taste bad?
- Why write?

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. By examining such questions, students are engaged in thinking like an expert.

- Is history inevitably biased?
- What is a proof?
- Nature or nurture?

Raise other important questions.

Thought-provoking Essential Questions are naturally generative. They lead to other important questions within, and sometimes across, subject boundaries.

- 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. 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.

- What makes a great book great?
- Are the Harry Potter novels great books?

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 many unthinkingly take for granted. They force us to ask deep questions about the nature, origin, and extent of our understanding.

- 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?

Source: Understanding by Design Presentation by Jay McTighe, ASCD 2003.