

Essential Questions

These are key questions that help to focus the learning. Essential Questions develop foundational understandings. They provide the fundamental organizing principles that bound an inquiry and guide the development of meaningful, authentic tasks. Essential questions have several key components:

Essential Questions...

- have no one right answer.
- can be answered by all students.
- enable all students to learn.
- involve thinking, not just answering.
- make students investigators.
- are provocative- they hook students into wanting to learn.
- offer a sense of adventure, are fun to explore and try to answer.
- require students to connect learning from several disciplines.
- challenge students to demonstrate that they understand the relationship between what they are learning and larger world issues.
- enable students to begin from their own past experience or understanding.

What is an essential question? Questions that probe for deeper meaning and set the stage for further questioning foster the development of critical thinking skills and higher order capabilities such as problem-solving and understanding complex systems. A good essential question is the principle component of designing inquiry-based learning.

What constitutes a good essential question? In general, the best essential questions center around major issues, problems, concerns, interests, or themes relevant to students' lives and to their communities. Good essential questions are open-ended, non-judgmental, meaningful and purposeful with emotive force and intellectual bite, and invite an exploration of ideas. Good essential questions encourage collaboration amongst students, teachers, and the community and integrate technology to support the learning process.

How do we write good essential questions? First, consider the focus of the unit or lesson activity. Ideas for a good essential question may stem from your students' particular interests in a topic (e.g. What makes a video game good?), community resources (How does pollution impact the Rio Grande River?), local curriculum expectations (e.g. Who was a great New Mexican leader?), or a topic suggested by the standards themselves (e.g. Where do waves come from?). Then, examine the theme or concept in the curriculum that must be addressed and brainstorm questions that you or the students believe would cause them to think about the concept without dictating the direction or outcome of their thinking (e.g. "Why is fighting bad?" contains its own answer, namely that fighting is bad). Finally, utilize the six typical queries that newspaper articles address: Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? and add the word "good" in front of the theme or concept.

How do guiding questions assist the learner? Once an essential question has been identified and agreed upon by the learners, the next step might be to formulate a list of related questions that will assist the learner in answering the essential question. Often embedded within an essential question are subcategories that will generate questions that guide the learner's inquiry. For example, the essential question "What makes a video game good?" might lead to subcategories such as graphics, ease of use, violence, and audience appropriateness, and their subsequent questions like "How do graphics affect the quality of the game?" or "How does ease of use contribute to its overall rating?"

Other thoughts on Essential Questions:

Essential questions reside at the top of *Bloom's Taxonomy* (Bloom, 1954). They require students to EVALUATE (make a thoughtful choice between options, with the choice based upon clearly stated criteria), to SYNTHESIZE (invent a new or different version) or to ANALYZE (develop a thorough and complex understanding through skillful questioning).

Essential questions spark our curiosity and sense of wonder. They derive from some deep wish to understand some thing which matters to us.