

What Makes a Question Essential?

Teachers regularly pose questions to their students, but the purpose and form of these questions can vary widely. This book is about a particular kind of question—one we call “essential.” So, what makes a question “essential”? Let us begin by engaging you in a bit of inquiry using the following concept-attainment exercise to examine the characteristics of an essential question. The exercise has three parts, as explained in the next several paragraphs.

First, examine the questions in the two columns and try to determine the distinguishing characteristics of the ones labeled “Essential” compared to those labeled “Not Essential.” What traits do the essential questions have in common? How do they differ from the others?

Essential Questions

- How do the arts shape, as well as reflect, a culture?
- What do effective problem solvers do when they get stuck?
- How strong is the scientific evidence?
- Is there ever a “just” war?
- How can I sound more like a native speaker?
- Who is a true friend?

Not Essential Questions

- What common artistic symbols were used by the Incas and the Mayans?
- What steps did you follow to get your answer?
- What is a variable in scientific investigations?
- What key event sparked World War I?
- What are common Spanish colloquialisms?
- Who is Maggie’s best friend in the story?

Second, look at these additional examples, organized by subject area, to spark your thinking and clarify the qualities of essential questions, or EQs.

Essential Questions in History and Social Studies

- Whose “story” is this?
- How can we know what *really* happened in the past?
- How should governments balance the rights of individuals with the common good?
- Should _____ (e.g., immigration, media expression) be restricted or regulated? When? Who decides?
- Why do people move?
- Why is that there? (geography)
- What is worth fighting for?

Essential Questions in Mathematics

- When and why should we estimate?
- Is there a pattern?
- How does *what* we measure influence *how* we measure? How does *how* we measure influence *what* we measure (or don’t measure)?
- What do good problem solvers do, especially when they get stuck?
- How accurate (precise) does this solution need to be?
- What are the limits of this math model and of mathematical modeling in general?

Essential Questions in Language Arts

- What do good readers do, especially when they don’t comprehend a text?
- How does *what* I am reading influence *how* I should read it?
- Why am I writing? For whom?
- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?
- What is the relationship between fiction and truth?
- How are stories from other places and times about me?

Essential Questions in Science

- What makes objects move the way they do?
- How are structure and function related in living things?
- Is aging a disease?
- Why and how do scientific theories change?
- How can we best measure what we cannot directly see?
- How do we decide what to believe about a scientific claim?

Essential Questions in the Arts

- What can artworks tell us about a culture or society?
- What influences creative expression?

- To what extent do artists have a responsibility to their audiences?
- Do audiences have any responsibility to artists?
- What's the difference between a thoughtful and a thoughtless critique?
- If practice makes perfect, what makes perfect practice?

Essential Questions in World Languages

- What should I do in my head when trying to learn a language?
- How can I express myself when I don't know all the words (of a target language)?
- What am I afraid of in hesitating to speak this language? How can I overcome my hesitancy?
 - How do native speakers differ, if at all, from fluent foreigners? How can I sound more like a native speaker?
 - How much cultural understanding is required to become competent in using a language?
 - How can I explore and describe cultures without stereotyping them?

As a result of comparing essential and nonessential questions and studying the additional examples, you should now have an idea of what makes a question "essential." Here are seven defining characteristics. A good essential question

1. Is *open-ended*; that is, it typically will not have a single, final, and correct answer.
2. Is *thought-provoking* and *intellectually engaging*, often sparking discussion and debate.
3. Calls for *higher-order thinking*, such as analysis, inference, evaluation, prediction. It cannot be effectively answered by recall alone.
4. Points toward *important, transferable ideas* within (and sometimes across) disciplines.
5. Raises *additional questions* and sparks further inquiry.
6. Requires *support* and *justification*, not just an answer.
7. *Recurrs* over time; that is, the question can and should be revisited again and again.

How does your working definition compare?

Questions that meet all or most of these criteria qualify as essential. These are questions that are not answerable with finality in a single lesson or a brief sentence—and that's the point. Their aim is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions, including thoughtful student questions, not just pat answers. They are provocative and generative. By tackling such questions, learners are engaged in *uncovering* the depth and richness of a topic that might otherwise be obscured by simply *covering* it.

Now we present the third part of the concept-attainment exercise. Using the characteristics we presented and those that you noted, which of the following questions do you think are essential? Why?