

Essential Questions

What are essential questions?

Essential questions are critical global, abstract, overarching questions that drive teaching and learning within a unit of study; they press learners to think beyond what they already know; they are the focus of learning and the central questions of inquiry. These questions represent the understanding that teachers most want their students to take away from a unit or activity. They may also be referred to as "Throughlines" or "driving questions."

What is the function of essential questions?

Essential questions...

Point to key inquiries and core ideas of a discipline;

Create a focus for the unit;

Force students beyond the learning of facts to a level of conceptual understanding;

Point clearly and explicitly toward a big idea;

Help students build a schema for knowledge transfer;

Reveal richness and complexity of a subject;

Challenge thinking beyond the facts;

Engage students in examining what's really important;

Engage students in activities that develop processes and skills and lead to content knowledge and conceptual understandings;

Enhance, encourage, and enable cross-discipline connections;

Allow for inductive teaching—guiding students to discover meaning rather than relying mainly on deductive lecture methods;

Aid and encourage thinking at high levels;

Raise other essential questions.

What do essential questions look like?

They cannot be answered satisfactorily in one sentence.

They are concept-based, not fact-based.

They are open-ended.

They are provocative and multi-layered.

They may serve to organize an entire year's curriculum.

They are global, universal, and abstract.

There are usually 2 to 5 per unit.

They may be difficult and esoteric.

How should we use essential questions in our classrooms?

Post essential questions in the classroom, on parent information about a unit, on handouts, and in student notebooks;

Organize notes and unit information around essential questions;

Let essential questions guide discussions, instruction, and investigations;

Refer to essential questions repeatedly;

Ask essential questions over and over;

Connect essential questions with concept maps;

Share your essential questions with other faculty members.

Unit/Lesson Essential Questions

What are unit/lesson essential questions?

Unit questions organize ideas and concepts within a specific unit. They are more specific and concrete and less global and abstract than essential questions. They frame learning, engage learners, provide links to more specific questions, and guide the exploration and uncovering of important ideas. Many believe that every lesson, regardless of how many days it covers, should have at least one essential question.

What do unit/lesson essential questions look like?

Unit questions...

Are tied directly to a specific idea or subject or discipline;

Have no one obvious right answer;

Are open-ended to accommodate diverse interests and learning styles and to allow for unique and creative approaches;

Are framed to provoke and sustain student interest and thought.

What is the function of unit/lesson essential questions?

They point to and uncover essential questions through particular topics and subjects;

Open up and suggest multiple lines of research and discussion;

Uncover a subject's controversies, perspectives, and puzzles;

Stimulate thoughts and suggest problems rather than lead a student to the one right answer that the teacher has in mind;

Lead to sustained inquiry;

Establish student priorities;

Focus student and teacher attention on what's important.

Essential Question	Unit Question
Must a story have a moral, heroes, and villains?	What is the moral of the story of the Holocaust? Is Huck Finn a hero?
How does an organism's structure enable it to its environment?	How do the structures of amphibians and rept support their survival?
Who is a friend?	Are Frog and Toad true friends? Has it been true in recent U.S. history and for affairs that "the enemy of my enemy is my fri
What is light?	How do cats see in the dark? Is light a particle or a wave?
Do we always mean what we say and say what we mean?	What are sarcasm, irony, and satire? How do genres allow us to communicate <i>without</i> saying we mean?
Is U.S. history a history of progress?	Is the gap between rich and poor any better n it was 100 years ago? Do new technologies always lead to progress?
Are "good reads" great books?	Is science fiction great literature?
Is there too much—or too little—national power?	Are the limits placed on the federal governme powers by the U.S. Constitution realistic and enforceable?

(Part of chart taken from *Understanding by Design*, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, p. 31.)

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How are Essential Questions related to course or lesson objectives?

Behavioral objectives state what students will do; essential questions or understanding goals tell what students should learn from what they are doing. Essential questions tell why the learning activities are important; behavioral objectives focus on action and knowledge or facts. Essential questions are much more powerful in the instructional process than traditional objectives. In a concept-based curriculum, it is not enough to teach only facts related to a topic; we must use broad questions to take thinking to the level of conceptual understanding and to help students build knowledge for transfer. Writing conceptual essential questions requires more thought and universal understanding on the part of a teacher than writing questions directed to specific facts.

Objectives for Geographic Regions and Cultures of the Pacific Northwest:

- Understand the impact of geographic regions on the development of culture.
- Identify the geographic regions.
- Compare the regions of Washington State.
- List the geographic features for each region.
- Describe how people use their land to meet basic needs.

Essential Questions for Geographic Regions and Cultures of the Pacific Northwest:

- Why do regions differ?
- How do regions in the Pacific Northwest differ?
- Why do cultures use land differently?
- How do the arts of Native American cultures reflect their natural surroundings?
- How is a culture affected by its geography?
- How is geography affected by a culture?