

What Are Essential Questions?

The essence of what your students will examine and learn in the course of their study (Jacobs, 1997).

Essential Questions ...

- Are worth asking or meaningful
- 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 invented
- 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

Examples:

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?
No	Yes
What types of energy sources are common in homes?	How can I reduce energy use at my home?
No	Yes
What is cloning	Should we clone humans?
No	Yes
What is AIDS?	What steps can I take to reduce the risk of contracting AIDS?

All Essential Question lead to Subsidiary Questions

Subsidiary Questions ...

- Are smaller questions which help answer essential question
- Provide the facts used to answer the essential question
- Are written as “what,” “when,” “who” questions
- Drive a project
- Allow for data collection
- Supply new information for further questioning

How to Write Essential Questions

Begin with Enduring Understandings

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

Create Essential Questions

1. 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
2. Frame your questions in "kid friendly" language. Make them engaging and thought provoking.
3. Write essential questions with **"how"** or **"why"** instead of "what"
4. Sequence your questions so they lead naturally from one to another
5. Post these questions in your room as a learning focus for your students
6. Remember: If a question is too specific, or could be answered with a few words or a sentence, they are probably not essential questions

Transforming Standards to a Big Idea and Essential Questions

Examples:

Content Area	California State Standards	Enduring Understanding	Essential Question
English-Language Arts	Grades 9 & 10 3.0 Literary Response & Analysis: Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science.	Students understand how a book like Rachel Carson's <i>Silent Spring</i> could be instrumental in changing government policies.	In her book <i>Silent Spring</i> Rachel Carson warned of the dangers of using pesticides like DDT. How was her book influential in bringing about a government ban on the use of this chemical?
Math	Grade 7 Measurement & Geometry: Students choose appropriate units of measure and use ratios to convert within and between measurement systems to solve problems.	Students understand that mathematical measurement skills have real life applications.	If you could redecorate your house anyway you wanted, how much carpeting, linoleum, paint or wallpaper would you need to buy? How much would these materials cost?
Science	Grade 4 Life Science: All organisms need energy and matter to live and grow.	Students understand that matter and energy are transferred from one organism to another in an ecosystem.	Everybody needs food to survive. In the kelp forest you could end up as somebody's dinner if you are low on the food chain! How are matter and energy transferred from one organism to another within a kelp forest?

Content Area	State Standards	Essential Understanding	Essential Question
Social Studies	Primary – Citizenship: The student will learn to recognize personal responsibility to the community.	Students understand that belonging to and positively participating in a community is important to every ones well being.	How does my community affect my life? And/or What do I owe my community -- or do I?

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

Essential Question Development Checklist

CHECK POINT	✓
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? OR</i> 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.	