

All About Writing Essential Questions

An essential question is any question requiring one of the following thought processes:

- a question which requires the student to develop a plan or course of action.
- a question that requires the student to make a decision.

The essential question directs the course of student research. As such, essential questions are powerful, directive and commit students to the process of critical thinking through inquiry. Ultimately, the answer to the essential question will require that students craft a response that involves knowledge construction. This new knowledge building occurs through the integration of discrete pieces of information obtained during the research process.

Answers to essential questions are a direct measure of student understanding.

From Point A to B: Avoiding the Simple Question.

Writing questions such as "What is cancer?" simply asks students to move information from one point (the resource) to another (their paper). By asking this type of question, the teacher gives license for the student to plagiarize. Instead of the above question, we may ask students the essential question: "What plan could you develop that would reduce your likelihood of developing cancer?" This is a more powerful question than "What is cancer" but the question is not yet finished. At this point it is helpful to visualize the answer. In this case, a student could answer this question by developing a list of strategies. They are still moving information. A much better question is "What plan could you develop that would reduce your likelihood of developing cancer? Your plan can have only two strategies. Defend why you selected those two strategies." In this case, the question requires students to discriminate among the potential list of strategies, and then defend their choice.

More examples:

- Why is the concept of cloning human beings controversial? (decision-making)
- What invention of the 20th Century has had the greatest impact? Justify your response (decision-making).
- Why was _____ the greatest home run hitter in baseball history? (decision-making)
- Which credit card is best for me? (decision-making).
- What plan could be developed to reduce the impact of zebra mussels on the Great Lakes ecosystem? Your plan can include three strategies. (developing an action plan)
- What is the best plan for losing 20 pounds? Your plan can include 3 strategies. (developing an action plan)
- What plan could I use to prepare for a 5K run? The plan can include 2 strategies.(developing an action plan)

And more Essential Questions Tips

These are key questions that help to focus the learning:

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 on 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 your project. Ideas for a good essential question may stem from your particular interests in a topic (e.g. What makes good customer service?), 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?"

But wait—more on The Essential Question

An essential question guides your research. Essential questions promote deep and enduring understanding. If you organize your project around a well-constructed essential

question, your project will be great. Here are some tips to keep in mind when developing an essential question.

What is NOT an essential question?

1. It is NOT a question that can be answered with a yes or no.
2. It is NOT a question that can be answered in one sentence.
3. It is NOT a blurry or large question that requires a five-pound book to answer.

An essential question IS:

1. It IS a question that guides your research.
2. It IS a question that will give your research a frame and a focus.
3. It IS clear and concise—or short and sweet.
4. It IS a question that tells your audience what your project will address.
5. It IS a question that has no single “right” answer.

How do I write an essential question?

1. Use the key words: how, what impact, what effect/affect, why, if, etc.
2. Use words that make sense to you
3. Remember that you might need to change your essential question when it doesn't make sense.

Essential Questions—Samples

Art and Dance

- In what ways does art reflect culture as well as shape it?
- How do artists choose tools, techniques, & materials to express their ideas?
- Where do artists get their ideas?
- How and what can we communicate through the language of dance?
- In what ways can motion evoke emotion?

Literature and Writing

- What makes a great story?
- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?
- What makes a great book?
- Can fiction reveal truth? Should a story teach its reader something?
- How does a reader “read between the lines”?
- Why do we punctuate? What might happen if we didn't have punctuation marks?
- Why write?
- What is a complete thought?

Science

- How does an organism's structure enable it to survive in its environment?
- How do organisms survive in harsh or changing environments?
- To what extent are science and common sense related?
- How are “form” and “function” related in biology?

Mathematics

- If axioms are like the rules of the game, when should we change the rules?
- When is the “correct” answer not the best solution?
- What are the limits of mathematical representation and modeling?

History and Government

- How do governments balance the rights of the individuals with the common good?
- How and why do we provide checks and balances on government power?
- Who should decide?
- Whose story is it? Why is history said to be the story told by the winners?
- What can we learn from the past?

Culinary Arts

- When is it ok to deviate from the recipe?
- What makes a safe kitchen?

Economics

- What determines value?
- Can macroeconomics inform microeconomics (and vice versa)?

Foreign Language

- What distinguishes a fluent foreigner from a native speaker?
- What can we learn about our own language and culture from studying another?

Geography

- What makes places unique and different?
- How does where we live influence how we live?

Health

- What is healthful living?
- How can a diet be healthy for one person and not another?

Physical Education and Athletics

- Who is a winner?
- Is pain necessary for progress in athletics? (“No pain, no gain.”)

Technology

- In what ways can technology enhance expression and communication? In what ways might technology hinder it?
- What are the pros and cons of technological progress?
- Who “wins” and who “loses” when technologies change?

