

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS



Definition

Open-ended questions designed to promote sustained inquiry and meaning making. Essential questions differ in scope and breadth. We distinguish between overarching and topical questions. **Overarching** essential questions point beyond the particulars of a unit to the larger, transferable ideas and enduring understandings. They recur fruitfully across the grades, spiraling throughout the curriculum to provide conceptual through lines. Effective overarching essential questions:

- are broad and general in nature; and
- lead to overarching understandings

Topical essential questions are more specific. They guide the exploration of ideas and processes within particular topics within a unit of study.

Essential questions are identified in Stage 1 for the purpose of:

1. Provoking deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and additional questions leading to new and/or deeper insight(s)
2. Asking students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas and rethink key ideas
3. Support connections within and across content and context

Examples

Overarching Essential Questions	Topical Essential Questions
<p>Visual Art</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>In what ways does art reflect culture as well as shape it?</i>• <i>How do artists choose tools, techniques, and materials to express their ideas?</i> <p>English/Language Arts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What makes a great story?</i>• <i>How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?</i>	<p>unit on masks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What do masks and their use reveal about the culture? What tools, techniques, and materials are used in creating masks from different cultures?</i> <p>unit on mysteries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What is unique about the mystery genre?</i>• <i>How do great mystery writers hook and hold their readers?</i>

Essential Questions

examples

Arithmetic (numeration)

- What is a number?
- Why do we have numbers? What if we didn't have numbers?
- Can everything be quantified?

Arts (visual and performing)

- Where do artists get their ideas?
- How does art reflect, as well as shape, culture?
- Do you like that (artwork)?

Culinary Arts

- When is it o.k. to deviate from the recipe?
- What makes a “safe” kitchen?

Dance

- How and what can we communicate through the “language” of dance?
- In what ways can motion evoke emotion?

Economics

- What determines value?
- Can macro-economics inform micro-economics (and vice-versa)?

Foreign/World 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?

Government

- Who should decide?
- How should we balance the rights of individuals with the common good?

Health

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

Essential Questions

examples

History

- Whose “story” is it?
- How do we know what to believe about historical claims?
- What can we learn from the past?

Literature

- What makes a “great” book/story?
- What “truths” can fiction reveal? Should a story teach you something?

Mathematics

- When is the “correct” answer not the best solution?
- What are the limits of mathematical representation/modeling?

Music

- How are sounds and silence organized in various musical forms?
- If practice makes perfect, what makes “perfect” practice?

Physical Education/Athletics

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

Reading/Language Arts

- How does *what* you read influence *how* you should read it?
- How do you read “between the lines?”
- Why do we punctuate? What if we didn’t have punctuation marks?

Science

- To what extent are science and common sense related?
- How are “form” and “function” related in biology?

Technology

- In what ways can technology enhance research and communication? In what ways might technology hinder them?
- What are the pros and cons of technological progress?

Writing

- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?
- How does audience and purpose influence writing style?
- What is a “complete” thought?

What Makes an Essential Question?

Questions that meet all or most of the following criteria qualify as “essential.” An essential question:

1) is open-ended; i.e., it typically will not have a single, final, and correct answer.

Essential questions yield inquiry and argument -- a variety of plausible (and arguable) responses, not straightforward facts that end the matter. They should *uncover* rather than cover (up) the subject’s controversies, puzzles, and perspectives.

2) is thought-provoking and intellectually engaging, often sparking discussion and debate.

Essential Questions work best when they are designed and edited to be thought-provoking to students, engaging them in sustained, focused inquiries. Such questions often involve the counter-intuitive, the visceral, the whimsical, the controversial, the provocative. *Is the Internet dangerous for kids? Are censorship and democracy compatible? Does food that is good for you have to taste bad?*

3) calls for high-order thinking, such as analysis, inference, evaluation, prediction. It cannot be effectively answered by recall alone (or via a Google search).

Their aim is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions, including thoughtful student questions, not just pat answers. They serve as doorways into focused yet lively inquiry and research. They are intended to result in conclusions drawn by the learner, not recited facts.

4) points toward important, transferable ideas within (and sometimes across) disciplines.

Essential questions reflect the most historically important issues, problems and debates in a field of study. *Is history inevitably biased? What is a proof? Nature or nurture?* By examining such questions, students are engaged in thinking like an expert (i.e., “doing” the subject).

5) raises additional questions and sparks further inquiry.

Thought-provoking essential questions are naturally generative. They lead to other important questions within, and sometimes across, subject boundaries. For example: *In nature, do only the strong survive?* leads to other questions and inquiries into human biology and the physics of physiology. *What do we mean by “strong?” Are insects strong (since they are survivors)?*

6) requires support and justification, not just an answer.

Essential questions are intended to elicit a variety of plausible (and arguable) responses. Students are expected to provide reasons and evidence. Thus, teachers pose follow-up prompts; e.g., *Why?, What’s your reasoning? Who agrees? Who disagrees? What’s another way of viewing this?*

7) recurs over time; i.e., the question can and should be re-visited again and again.

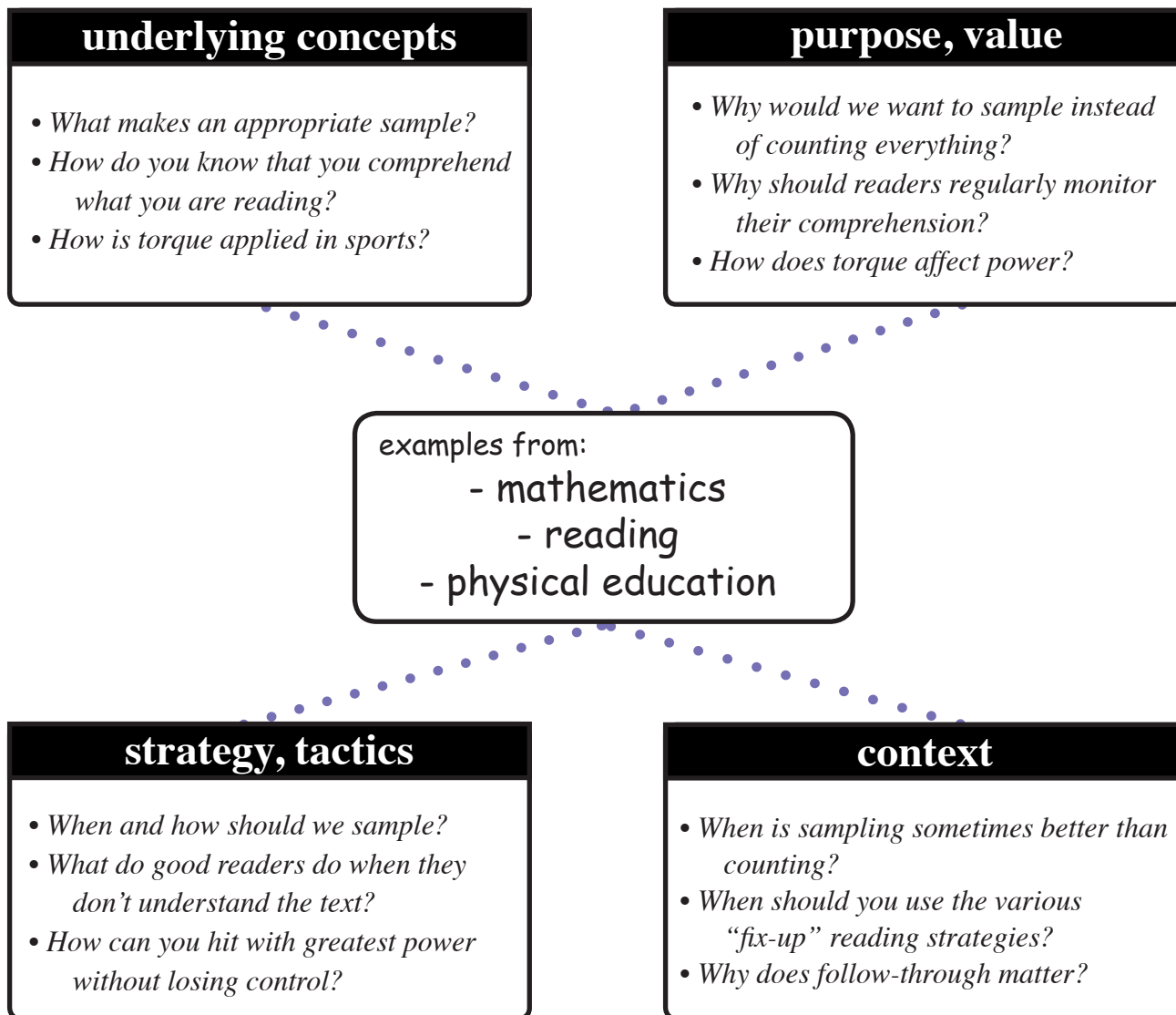
These are questions that are not answerable with finality in a single lesson or brief sentence – and that’s the point. The same important questions get asked and re-asked throughout one’s learning and in the history of the field. For example: *What makes a great book great? Are the Harry Potter novels great books?* can be productively examined and re-examined by first graders as well as college students. Over time, student responses become more sophisticated, nuanced, and well-reasoned.

Essential Questions in Skill Areas

There is a common misunderstanding among many educators that teaching for understanding of “big ideas” are not really central to the teaching of skill-focused areas, such as beginning literacy, physical education, and mathematics. On the contrary: everything we know about learning tells us that teaching for conceptual understanding is essential to more accurate and efficient skill performance. Essential questions in skill areas may be considered in terms of the following categories:

- **key concept(s)** – *What are the “big ideas” underlying effective skill performance?*
- **purpose, value** – *Why is the skill important?*
- **strategy, tactics**– *What strategies do skilled performers employ? How can skill performance become more efficient and effective?*
- **context** – *When should you use the skill?*

Use the space below to brainstorm possible essential questions for important skills.



Revising Essential Questions

Original Draft	Commentary	Revision	Commentary
<i>Are there any benefits from the deforestation of the rain forests?</i>	The question calls for some information gathering and analysis, but ends in a list.	<i>Do the benefits outweigh the costs of deforestation?</i>	The revised question broadens the inquiry and calls for a more sophisticated analysis; far more likely to spark debate and deeper inquiry into any list of pros and cons.
<i>How does this diet match up with the USDA Guidelines?</i>	The question requires some analysis and evaluation, but there is a “correct” answer.	<i>What should we eat?</i>	A much more open version with lots of inquiry and debate potential.
<i>What is non-fiction?</i>	A definitional question with an unambiguous answer.	<i>How much license does a writer of non-fiction have to make a point?</i>	This version of the question explores an interesting “grey” area having both historical and contemporary relevance.
<i>Who speaks Spanish in our community?</i>	A straightforward question asking for a list.	<i>How well can you thrive speaking only English?</i>	A more provocative version calling for greater analysis and a shift of perspective.
<i>What is an axiom?</i>	A straight-forward question calling for a “definitional” answer.	<i>Why should we assume that?</i>	A much more open question that gets at why some things are “given” even if they do not seem obvious or necessary.
<i>What distinguishes Impressionist art?</i>	A “leading” question with an expected set of characteristics.	<i>Why and how do artists break with tradition?</i>	These questions require an examination of artistic trends and call for a generalization by learners.
<i>What types of exercises will improve fitness?</i>	This question involves research but is leading-toward expected answers.	<i>“No pain, no gain” – agree?</i>	A more provocative question, likely to spark discussion, debate – and further inquiry.