

Community

Using Essential Questions to Focus Teaching and Learning

Essential questions were conceived by Dr. TheodoreSizer, Dean of Brown University School of Education after studying high schools in this country for a Carnegie research project. His book, Horace's Compromise describes the frustration of a teacher trying to help his students develop their knowledge and skills. Among factors like the schedule, course structures, the evaluation process and the physical space, Horace felt like the most important questions were almost impossible to address.

The idea of essential questions, formed by scholars, teachers and students, has become a cornerstone of many reform efforts around the country. Teachers who use essential questions report that they are a powerful tool for focusing daily classroom activity on a meaningful goal. For students, essential questions are a clear statement of expectations - what they will know and be able to do, allowing them to take more responsibility for taking learning away from every lesson.

[Enduring Essential Questions](#)

[Teaching with Essential Questions](#)

[Writing Essential Questions](#)

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Examples of enduring essential questions

Identity and History

Who am I?

Who is my family?

What is the group to which I belong?

What is the story of that group?

Other People & Groups

Who are the other people around me and in other parts of the world?

How are they similar to and different from me?

How do they look? What do they do?

What is their story?

My Place in the World

Where do I live?

How do I get here?

How do I fit into the universe?

What will happen to me as I grow and when I die?

The Psychological World

What is in my mind? Do others have minds? Are they like mine?

What are thoughts, dreams and feelings?
Where do my emotions come from? How can I handle them?
How do I remember things? How do I communicate?

The Biological World

What about other creatures? Do animals think? plants?
What does it mean to be alive? dead?
How are animals related to one another and to the world of plants and to humans?
Is there a substance of life? How is it created?

The Physical World

What is the world made up of?
Why do things move?
What do we know about the sun, the waters, the rocks - their origins, their fate?

Forms, Patterns, Sizes

Why do things look and feel the way they do?
What regularities are there in the world?
How do they come about?
What is big? biggest?
How can you tell?

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Teaching with Essential Questions

What is an Essential Question?

What strikes you about these questions?
Where do they come from?
What do you do with them?
How do you evaluate them?

How do I elicit them from students . . .

What do you want to know?
What is there to know?
What questions have people asked on this subject?
What questions have been answered? not answered?

How do Essential Questions shape the curriculum?

When would students need or want to address this question?
How will they explore what they already know? - identify what they don't know - plan? - find out more? (resources)
Work with others?
Show what they know?

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Characteristics for writing essential questions

1. Are posed within the context of important life questions.
2. Are written so students can understand them
3. Have no obvious right or simple answers
4. Require higher order thinking, problem solving or decision-making
5. Use concepts which require students to use their knowledge in developing responses.
6. Cause students to organize their knowledge to uncover and recover important ideas now and in the future



Links

[Dramatica's Twelve Essential Questions](#): Do you know these things about your story? Screenplay writers use essential questions to shape their work

[CNN's Millenium: A Thousand Years of History](#)

Essential questions created to go along with television segments of history

[Bellingham School District's "The Research Cycle Begins with an 'Essential Question'"](#)

Examples of essential questions for each grade level

[Internet Innovations Incorporated](#) - Asking the Essential Question

How to write the questions that shape research

[Integrated Curriculum - Essential Questions](#)

Heidi Hayes Jacob's criteria for forming essential questions

[Waltham Public Schools Long-Range Technology/Library Plan: The 12 Essential Questions](#) An example of how one school shapes their technology plan using essential questions

[Coalition of Essential Schools Fieldbook](#) Essential questions across disciplines

[Essential Questions for Understanding the Western United States and Colorado](#)

[OceanQuest 2000](#): Essential Questions in ocean preservation