Essential Questions and Authenticity

Teachers can use this tool to better understand how asking essential questions, and providing students opportunities through the entire learning process to answer them, can help support authenticity in the classroom.

Essential questions are large, universal questions worth contemplation and exploration. Guiding questions are specific and answerable questions that support the essential question.

**Essential questions** can:
- Launch a unit, course, session, or year
- Serve as diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments
- Serve as meta-cognitive devices
- Be a tool for aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment

**Essential and guiding questions** are designed to work together. Summative assessments typically seek to answer just one essential question. Guiding questions can be used during the curriculum to support student learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>Guiding Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Set the context for learning</td>
<td>• Provide the specifics as to what to learn</td>
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<td>• Focus the teacher and students on the overarching target for learning</td>
<td>• Identify the specific content and process learning targets</td>
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<td>• Generate windows for interdisciplinary explorations; make real-world connections</td>
<td>• Identify possible lines of inquiry</td>
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<td>• Move students from acquiring and reciting information to processing, analyzing and synthesizing it</td>
<td>• Define what will be explored within each discipline</td>
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<td>• Personalize learning experiences</td>
<td>• Provides guidance on how to make real-world connections</td>
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<td>• Search for meaningful answers</td>
<td>• Synthesize what will be studied and connect it to the larger idea</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Generate new questions</td>
<td>• Present an action plan for a personalized study</td>
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**Examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>What is technology?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is new necessarily better?</td>
<td>What are simple machines?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do simple machines affect our lives?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What inventions have helped us? How else have they affected us?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What are new ideas that could help us?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What are some possible negative effects of this kind of new invention?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>What are human rights?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Are human rights guaranteed?</td>
<td>Does everyone have the same rights?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the constitution protect your rights?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why do some people lose their rights?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Is there anything that can be done when people lose their rights?</td>
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<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>What are character traits?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Does setting influence character?</td>
<td>How do the characters in this book demonstrate these traits?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the setting and plot of books affect the characters in the book?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do the characters in the book change or remain the same? Why?</td>
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Criteria for Essential Questions

Essential questions are:

• Universal, existential, and even paradoxical questions
• Require and promote deep thinking
• Are equally relevant to people from different ages, cultures and backgrounds
• Can cross disciplines
• Invite multiple perspectives and even controversy
• Elicit new questions and raise doubts
• Debatable; no one can completely and fully provide the right answer although one can produce a better answer based on the richness and diversity of evidence and argumentation
• Deserve to be revisited over time

Examples of Essential Questions

1. Who counts as a real American?
2. Can/should change be stopped?
3. How responsible are we for the behavior of others?
4. How should we define poverty?
5. What is the meaning of life?
6. Who am I?
7. Is progress necessary?
8. Does history really repeat itself?
9. Are some stereotypes true?
10. Who decides what history is?
11. Where does perception end and reality begin?
12. How far is far?
13. Is there such a thing as a selfless act?
14. Is time an absolute thing?
15. What makes writing worth reading?
16. How do we explain the unexplainable?
17. Is it better to live with the right question or the wrong answer?
18. What is essential?
19. Do we have control over our destiny?
20. What is space?
21. What’s the point of a point-of-view?
22. Is there anything original?
23. If we are so alike, how do we explain our differences?
24. Can there be good without evil?
25. Is war inevitable?
26. What is war for?
27. Can a child be a scientist?
28. Are humans inhumane?
29. Can a moral person be immoral?
30. What of mathematics is essential?
31. Are numbers real?
32. When is freedom not worth fighting for?
33. Are all cultures equally valuable?
34. What is satisfaction?
35. What is happiness?
36. Can we love the work but loath the creator?
37. Is love at first sight love?
38. What makes art art?
39. When does a sound become music?
40. When does movement become dance?
41. When does loyalty become cowardice?
42. Can you win and lose at the same time?
43. Are there any absolutes?
44. What is worth teaching?
45. What is worth learning?
46. What part of what makes a good employee is teachable?
47. What is good parenting?
48. When is cheating not bad?
49. Is education essential for life’s success?
50. When does patriotism become jingoism?
51. What is justice?
52. When is the whole greater than sum of the parts?
53. What is beauty?
54. Should the government legislate morality?
55. Is religion a necessary component of society?
56. Is there a planetary culture?
57. What makes language “beautiful”?
58. When is the price/cost of discovery too high?