

# Essential Questions

**Have no simple 'right' answer; they are meant to be argued.**

Essential Questions yield inquiry and argument - a variety of plausible (and arguable) responses, not straight forward facts that end the matter. They serve as doorways into focused yet lively inquiry and research. They should uncover rather than cover the subject's controversies, puzzles, and perspectives. They are intended to result in conclusions drawn by the learner, not recited facts. For example, Does art reflect culture or help shape it? Can we look but not see? Why do 'seers' see what the rest of us don't? Does the artist see more clearly or look elsewhere?

**Are designed to provoke and sustain student inquiry, while focusing learning and final performances.**

Essential Questions work best when they are designed and edited to be thought provoking to students, engaging them in sustained, focused inquiries that culminate in important performance. Such questions often involve the counterintuitive, the visceral, the whimsical, the controversial, the provocative. For example, Is the Internet dangerous for kids? Are censorship and democracy compatible? Does food that is good for you have to taste bad? Why write? Students develop and deepen their understanding of important ideas as they explore these questions.

**Often address the conceptual or philosophical foundations of a discipline.**

Essential Questions reflect the most historically important issues, problems, and debates in a field of study. For example, Is history inevitably biased? What is a proof? Nature or nurture? By examining such questions, students are engaged in thinking like an expert.

**Raise other important questions.**

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 What do we mean by 'strong'? Are insects strong (since they are survivors)? What does it mean to be psychologically strong? Inquiries into human biology and the physics of physiology also follow.

**Naturally and appropriately recur.**

The same important questions are asked and asked again 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? These questions can be productively examined and reexamined by 1<sup>st</sup> graders as well as college students. Over time, student responses become more sophisticated, nuanced, well-reasoned and supported as their understandings deepen.

**Stimulate vital, ongoing rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons.**

Essential Questions challenge our unexamined assumptions, the inevitable simplification of our earlier learning, and the arguments we may unthinkingly take for granted. They force us to deep questions about the nature, origin, and extent of our understanding. For example, In light of fractions, place value, irrationals, and negative square roots ---- what is a number? Is it 'democratic' to have an electoral college? What IS a friend? Can the enemy of my enemy be my friend? What is a story, if a story has no clear plot or moral? Is history more of a story than a science? What are the implications for studying history, if so?

# Essential Questions Samples

## Economics

- Why do we have money?
- What does it mean to make a living?
- How does something acquire a value?
- What effect does the economy have on society?
- How do economic systems affect your life and the lives of others?
- How are economic resources distributed?
- What impact does scarcity have on the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services?
- How does trade affect local, national, & international relationships?
- What impact does trade have on a society?

## Culture

- What is culture?
- What can we learn about a culture through its art forms?
- What are the benefits and challenges of a diverse society?
- Why should we study other cultures and what does it teach us?
- How do the beliefs and values of a diverse culture affect individuals and society?
- What happens when cultures collide?
- Why do people live together and form societies?

## Geography

- How does geography influence lifestyle and point of view?
- How do geography, climate, and natural resources affect the way people live and work?
- What story do maps and globes tell?
- What makes places unique and different?
- How do maps and globes reflect history, politics, and economics?
- What effect do people have on their environment?

## Science and Technology

- Is new technology always better than that which it will replace?
- How do new technologies result in broader social change?
- How does who you are help determine your perception of progress?

# Essential Questions Samples

## History

- Whose story is it? Is history the story told by the winners?
- What can we learn from the past?
- What causes change over time?
- How does the evaluation of past events help us to make future decisions?
- How can we know if we weren't there?
- How am I connected to those in the past?
- Can an individual make a difference in history?
- Why do people fight? Is conflict inevitable? desirable? avoidable?
- What is worth fighting for? What is revolution?
- How has the interpretation of history changed?
- What should we do when primary sources disagree? Whom do we believe & why?

## Government

- What is power?
- How is power gained, used, and justified?
- How do competing interests influence how power is distributed and exercised?
- How are governments created, structured maintained, and changed?
- What happens in the absence of government?
- Why do we have rules & laws; and what would happen if we didn't?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of citizens and government in a democratic society?
- What effect does a democratic government have on society?



*Essential Questions Engage  
Students!*

# Criteria for Creating Essential Questions

- ❑ is clearly connected to a state standard/essential understanding
- ❑ is provocative
- ❑ is stated simply and clearly
- ❑ is arguable from different points of view
- ❑ allows/makes students synthesize and evaluate historical information
- ❑ deals with issues to which students have direct access-and interest

*Write your sample  
questions here.*

