

# Essential Questions

(description)

*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 straightforward 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 1st 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 ask 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?

# Drafting Essential Questions

## Government and Politics

Overarching Essential Questions	Adapt these questions or generate new ones
<p>Who should govern or rule?            Should the majority always rule?            Why do we have rules and laws?            Who should make the rules and laws?            Is it ever OK to break the law?            To what extent should society control individuals?            How do governments balance the rights of individuals with the common good?            What are "inalienable rights"?            Should _____ be restricted or regulated?            (e.g., immigration, alcohol/drugs, media)            When? Who decides?</p>	
<p>How do the structures and functions of government interrelate?            How do different political systems vary in their toleration and encouragement of change?            How do politics and economics interrelate?</p>	
<p>How do personal responsibilities and civic responsibilities differ?            Can an individual really make a difference?            What are the roles and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy?            What is a good citizen?            How do citizens (both individually and collectively) influence government policy?</p>	
<p>What is power? What forms does it take?            How is power gained, used, and justified?            How can abuse of power be avoided?            Is a two-party system best?</p>	
<p>What constitutes a great leader?            Are great leaders made or born (nature or nurture)?</p>	

Government and Politics

## The Six Facets of Understanding

### Facet 1—EXPLANATION

Sophisticated and apt explanations and theories that provide knowledgeable and justified accounts of events, actions, and ideas: Why is that so? What explains such events? What accounts for such action? How can we prove it? To what is this connected? How does this work?

### Facet 2—INTERPRETATION

Narratives, translations, metaphors, images, and artistry that provide meaning: What does it mean? Why does it matter? What of it? What does it illustrate or illuminate in human experience? How does it relate to me? What makes sense?

### Facet 3—APPLICATION

Ability to use knowledge effectively in new situations and diverse contexts: How and where can we use this knowledge, skill, or process? How should my thinking and action be modified to meet the demands of this particular situation?

### Facet 4—PERSPECTIVE

Critical and insightful points of view: From whose point of view? From which vantage point? What is assumed or tacit that needs to be made explicit and considered? What is justified or warranted? Is there adequate evidence? Is it reasonable? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the idea? Is it plausible? What are its limits? So what? What is a novel way to look at this?

### Facet 5—EMPATHY

The ability to get "inside" another person's feelings and world view: How does it seem to you? What do they see that I don't? What do I need to experience if I am to understand? What was the author, artist, or performer feeling, seeing, and trying to make me feel and see?

### Facet 6—SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The wisdom to know one's ignorance and how one's patterns of thought and action inform as well as prejudice understanding: How does who I am shape my views? What are the limits of my understanding? What are my blind spots? What am I prone to misunderstand because of prejudice, habit, or style? How do I learn best? What strategies work for me?

# From Topics to Big Ideas

Given the topic of your unit, brainstorm possible Big Ideas using the following categories.

Topic:

Concepts

Themes

Issues or Debates

Problems or Challenges

Processes

Theories

Paradoxes

Assumptions or Perspectives

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