

Questions to Frame Lessons or Units

A. Essential Questions: Adapted from the National Endowment for the Arts Summer Teacher Institutes:

A well constructed curriculum unit poses at least one **essential question** that is integrally linked to the understanding of the large concepts of the unit. Good essential questions are open-ended and meaningful. They should elicit emotional responses and intellectual inquiry. In the anchor work approach, high quality essential questions should:

- Focus on deeper understandings of the text(s)* being considered, fundamental human conditions that emerge from the text(s), and the deep meaning of and reaction to the text(s);
- Be relevant and meaningful for students; and
- Encourage deep exploration of ideas related to the text(s).

* *Text in this context is defined as not only written documents but in a larger sense that includes works and performances of art*

B. Characteristics of Essential Questions: adapted from Grant Wiggins' *Understanding by Design*

1. Go to the heart of the discipline. Essential questions can be found in the historically important and controversial problems and topics in various field of study: Is a "good read" a great book? Is history always biased? Do men naturally differ from women?

2. Recur naturally throughout one's learning and in the history of a field. The same important questions are asked and re-asked as an outgrowth of the work. Our answers may become increasingly sophisticated, and our framing of the question may reflect a new nuance, but we return again and again to such questions.

3. Raise other important questions. They invariably open up a subject, its complexities, and its puzzles; they suggest fruitful research rather than lead to premature closure or unambiguous answers. For example, what do we mean by "naturally" differ? (See #1 above, last question.)

(**Sample Essential Questions:** Does art reflect culture or shape it? Must a story have a beginning, middle and end? When is a law unjust? Who owns what and why? Is there enough [food, water, clothes] to go around?)

C. Wiggins makes this distinction between essential and unit questions:

Essential questions may not always serve as a doorway into a specific topic, despite the question's overarching and provocative nature. It may simply prove to be too global or abstract for students. **Unit questions** are more subject- and topic-specific, and therefore better suited for framing particular content and inquiry.

The distinction between essential and unit questions is not black and white. Instead they should be viewed along a continuum of specificity. The point is not to quibble about whether a question is essential or unit, but rather to focus on its larger purpose—to frame the learning, engage the learner, link to more specific and more general questions, and guide exploration and uncovering of important ideas.

Essential Questions	Unit Questions
Must a story have a moral, heroes and villains?	What is the moral of the story of the Holocaust? Is Huck Finn a hero?
How does an organism's structure enable it to survive in its environment?	How do the structures of amphibians and reptiles support their survival?
Who is a friend?	Are Frog and Toad true friends? Has it been true in recent U.S. history and foreign affairs that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"?
What is light?	How do cats see in the dark? Is light a particle or a wave?
Is U.S. history a history of progress?	Is the gap between rich and poor any better now than it was 100 years ago? Do new technologies always lead to progress?

Such questions are not just posed once orally by teachers. They are posted on blackboards, as the heading of student pages in notebooks, and on unit handouts. They frame and structure the lessons and give rise to appropriate research, note taking and final performances. Our teaching design as well as our teaching style must ensure that students see learning as anchored in questions and requiring cycles of questions-answers-questions. If students are to understand what is known, they need to simulate or recreate some of the inquiry by which the knowledge was created.

