



Curriculum Framer: Essential Questions (Expanded Help)

*Essential Questions – CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

A question is *essential* if it meets the following criteria:

To what extent is the question meant to –

1. cause genuine and relevant inquiry into the big ideas of the core content?
2. provoke deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions?
3. require students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas, and justify their answers?
4. stimulate vital on-going rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, prior lessons?
5. spark meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences?
6. naturally recur, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations?

△ MISCONCEPTION ALERT: Non-essential (but important-to-the-teacher) questions

Don't think that just because a question is important to your unit that it is therefore "Essential." Here are examples of common non-essential questions:

- What are the elements of a story?
- How does the body turn food into energy?
- Why does the future tense matter?
- What are real-world applications of [*a topic*]
- What were the causes of [*any event*]?
- Why is it important to be healthy?

Each of these questions is important but not "essential" in our sense. It is really just seeking (or pointing to) an "official" and final correct answer instead of setting up an in-depth and often open inquiry; or it asks for a list rather than in-depth inquiry.



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👉 Design tip

A slight edit can make a big difference. *Why does grammar matter?* is a ‘teacherly’ question with a right answer; no one in the real world would ask such a question stated this way. However, *How much does good grammar matter, and where does it matter most?* is a thought-provoking and arguable discussion about the importance of grammar in varied contexts – something argued enthusiastically ever since authors had characters using ungrammatical speech in literature.

*Essential Questions and young children

Essential questions are not high-falutin’ or fit only for older or advanced students.

Consider the following questions for use with children in the primary grades:

- Which strangers can I trust?
- What should I do when I get stuck?
- Why did that ‘bad’ thing happen? (e.g. fight on the playground, accident in the park, thoughtless stealing, etc.)
- Must every story teach you something?
- What did I see and what didn’t I see? How can I see better?
- If that’s my purpose, how should I speak?
- How can I best show _____ (e.g., the pattern, my ideas, etc.)?

EXAMPLE: STUDENT THINK-ALOUD:

Which stranger should I trust? I am lost in this crowded store, and I cannot find my mom; what should I do? I need to get help from a stranger – but which one? Gee a “trustworthy” stranger – who might *that* be? Oh, but I was told to be careful and never to talk to or go with strangers – then what do I do now??? I need to ask someone. So, which of these strangers *can* I trust – mindful of the danger? Well, someone who works for the store, in store clothes, seems like the most *safe* stranger...”



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* Essential = timeless and ageless

Essential Questions thus can be and should be asked of people across all age levels. Here are examples of such timeless questions:

- Who is my audience, and what follows for what I say and how I say it?
- What should I do when I am stuck?
- How much power should leaders have?
- Which parts of me and my life are given, and which parts of me am I free to change?
- Who is a true friend?
- What does it mean to be an American?
- How can I turn this unfamiliar and complicated problem/situation into something more familiar and easier to work with?
- What does this (e.g., picture, text, play) mean?
- Why do people move?

* Essential = Recurring

Such questions transcend any given unit topic, and sometimes, even subject areas. They can fruitfully be asked over and over again. Indeed, "spiraling" into greater depth using the same question is more likely to develop and deepen understanding than a curriculum that covers hundreds of topics on a single pass.

* Essential questions for skills

Essential Questions exist whenever there are issues related to purpose or strategy. This is also true of questions related to skill. There are arguably no essential questions about a particular skill; there are many questions about which skills to use when – i.e. questions of strategy and purpose.

△ **MISCONCEPTION ALERT:** "I teach skills; there are no big ideas and hence essential questions in my subject..." Not so. When we are confronted with real challenges, in transfer situations, we must ask questions; e.g., *Which* skill is best used here? *What* approach is likely to be most efficient and effective here? *When* should I use this



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strategy vs. that one? How will *this* audience influence my performance? Strategy and purpose questions are all “essential” ones. And transfer of skill always requires asking strategic questions – questions involving judgments, not mere facts.

Consider a few of Polya’s famous problem-solving questions in mathematics from his classic book *How to Solve it*:

- *Have you seen it before?* Or have you seen the same problem in a slightly different form?
- *Do you know a related problem?* Do you know a theorem that could be useful?
- *Look at the unknown!* And try to think of a familiar problem having the same unknown.
- *Here is a problem related to yours and solved before. Could you use it?*¹

More examples of Essential Questions:

Essential Questions in Social Studies

- Whose "story" is this? Whose voices *aren't* we hearing?
- How should governments balance the rights of individuals with the common good?
- Should _____ be restricted/regulated? (e.g., immigration, alcohol/drugs, media, etc.) When? Who decides?
- Why do people move? When do they 'have to' move and when do they 'choose' to move?
- What is worth fighting for? Who decides?

Essential Questions in Mathematics

- What kind of problem is this?
- What should I do when I'm stuck?
- When is estimation o.k.? Best?
- How can I simplify this into a more familiar and easier to work with quantity?
- What is the pattern?
- How does *what* we measure influence *how* we measure? How does *how* we measure influence *what* we measure (or don't measure)?
- How accurate (precise) does this need to be?
- Given _____, what can we conclude? What can't we conclude?

Essential Questions in Language Arts

- What is the relationship between "fiction" and "truth?"
- How are stories from other places and times about me?
- Have we run across this idea before?
- What do good readers do?
- What is the author saying? What makes you think so?
- How do texts differ, and how should I read as a result?
- What should I do when the text doesn't make any sense?
- How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?
- Why am I writing? For whom?

¹ Polya, *How to Solve It*, p. iv - x



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Essential Questions - Art

- What is art? How does it differ from “crafts”?
- Where can we find art? Who says it is art?
- What can artworks tell us about a culture or society? How can they mislead us about that culture/society?
- What’s the difference between a thoughtful and thoughtless critique?
- Do artists have a responsibility to their audiences? Do audiences have a responsibility to artists?

Essential Questions in Science

- Why does this thing move *that* way? What makes objects move the way they do?
- What are we made of? What is everything made of?
- How are structure and function related in living things? Why is this creature doing this and built like that?
- What’s determined and what’s an accident?
- Is this error an avoidable mistake or inherent in the data?
- How can we best measure what we cannot directly see?
- “Where did it go?” (with reference to conservation of energy/matter)

Examples of Essential Questions for Skills:

SUBJECT	SKILL	STRATEGY	RELEVANT EQs
Reading	“Sound out” unfamiliar words.	<i>Use context clues to figure out the word’s meaning.</i>	What’s the author trying to say? How can I find out what these words might mean?
Writing	Follow the 5-paragraph essay structure.	<i>Match your word choices with your purpose and audience.</i>	If that’s my purpose and audience, what follows for my writing?
Mathematics	Dividing fractions: Invert and multiply.	Problem Solving: • <i>Simplify equivalent expressions.</i> • <i>Work backward from end result.</i>	How can I turn unknowns into knowns? What form must this end up in?
Visual Arts/ Graphic Design	Use the color wheel to select complementary colors.	<i>Use colors to reinforce the mood you want to evoke in the viewer.</i>	What am I trying to make the viewer feel? How can I best express it?
Carpentry	Apply proper techniques when using a band saw.	<i>Measure twice, cut once.</i>	How can I best save time, money, and energy?

Reading

1. How do readers draw logical inferences based upon what is in the text?
2. How do readers use strategic skills to develop higher level thinking about text?
3. How can we demonstrate our knowledge of what we read?
4. What are the literary elements of fantasy?
5. How do readers synthesize their reading to deepen their understanding?
6. How do readers include appropriate and important details when summarizing text?
7. How do readers understand the underlying message or theme of a text?
8. How do readers use the text structure to identify the main ideas?
9. How do readers utilize nonfiction conventions to locate information and answer questions?
10. How do readers determine the main idea of a text and support it with key details?
11. How do readers utilize nonfiction conventions to locate information and answer questions?
12. How do readers synthesize and evaluate information from multiple sources?

Interdisciplinary Approach to American History and Literature (Gr. 7-12)

Big Idea	Essential Questions
Assimilation/ Group identity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which group(s) do I belong to? 2. What brings us together? What divides us? 3. What does it mean to be an American?
Opportunity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What is the American dream? 5. Who has access to the American dream? 6. What responsibility does government have to the people?
Struggle for equality/ Overcoming injustice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. What does discrimination look like? Can it be overcome? 8. How much will people risk to achieve a goal? 9. When should you work within the system? When should you work to overthrow it? 10. How does what I believe affect what I see?
Cultural Voice/ Heritage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. How does family influence who we are? Who we become? 12. What makes a group powerful? 13. What do we learn about a group/culture by the stories they tell?
Power of the individual	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Who is responsible for me? 15. How does one person create change? 16. When does a person define a place? 17. When do I stand up for what I believe in?
Change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 18. When does an innovation change how we live? 19. What causes people to change where they live? What they believe? How they behave? 20. How does what I experience shape who I am? 21. When do we long for the way it used to be?
Personal identity/ World view	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 22. How do I see the world? Where did those ideas come from? 23. How does what I believe affect how I act? 24. How does what I experience shape who I am? 25. When do I stand up for what I believe in? What does it take to be heard?
Overcoming adversity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 26. How much will people risk/sacrifice to achieve a goal? 27. When does your desire to defeat an enemy make you lose yourself?
Responsibility and sacrifice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 28. Who is responsible for me? 29. What responsibility does the government have to the people? 30. When do we have a responsibility to act? 31. When do we sacrifice our freedom for the common good? 32. What sacrifices have other people made to make your life possible? What gave them the strength to do it?
Rebellion/ revolution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 33. What do we fight wars over? 34. What are the rules of war? 35. Who is the enemy in this conflict? 36. Is it necessary to rebel against authority to understand who you are? 37. What gives a group/leader credibility?
Trust/cynicism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 38. When does a person lose credibility? What does it take to get it back? 39. How come more people don't vote? 40. Who do we trust to speak for us?
Regionalism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 41. How does where I live shape what I believe? How I behave? How I speak? 42. What makes this place unique? 43. What brings us together? What divides us?
Work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 44. How does what people do for a living shape who they are? How they are seen by others?
Power of words	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 45. How do words inspire people to act? 46. What makes language powerful? 47. What are you not allowed to say?

MATH & SCIENCE

1. What is the best way to show this pattern/relationship?
2. How do you represent this mathematical idea?
3. Can you describe this data with an equation? What do you learn from doing this?
4. How can mathematics be used to show change?
5. How does the pattern help you see what comes before/next?
6. Can you make this a more doable/workable problem and how does that help you? Can you make a more complex/general problem and how does that help you?
7. How does this problem/concept connect to other things I've learned?
8. How do I use data to make predictions?
9. Where do these patterns/relationships exist outside of the classroom?
10. What does this pattern/relationship give me the power to do/quantify?
11. What is the pattern here?
12. What attributes define a family/group/set? What family/group/set does this pattern/problem belong to?
13. What does the right answer look like?
14. How do I know when a solution is reasonable?
15. What is the best (most efficient, most appropriate for my brain) way to solve this problem?
16. How can I represent the same idea in different ways? How does that knowledge help me?
17. What's my plan? How is it working? What do I do if I get stuck?
18. What am I learning from working with this problem?
19. How are experimental questions generated and answered?
20. When should you be suspicious?
21. How do opinions and bias influence inquiry?
22. How can the reliability of information be judged?

THE ARTS

1. What is theatre/drama?
2. Where can we find theatre – and art more generally?
3. Why and how do people create?
4. How does theatre communicate with audiences?
5. How does art reflect as well as shape culture?
6. What can we learn as artists from studying the art of others?
7. How do artists from different eras explore and express similar themes?
8. What is the artistic process?
9. What factors influence artistic expression?
10. How and where do artists get their ideas?
11. How do artists express their ideas?
12. What does the work of art say about the creator?
13. Who determines the meaning of a work of art?
14. Should theatre have a message?
15. How is feeling or mood conveyed visually/nonverbally?
16. How is feeling or mood conveyed through movement?
17. Is the medium the message?
18. Are some media better than others for communicating particular ideas?
19. Do artists have a responsibility to their audiences? To society?
20. Should we censor artistic expression?
21. Should aesthetics supersede function?
22. What if we didn't have the arts in our world?
23. Why study theatre?
24. How can we learn from the past?
25. How does theatre connect us to people in the past?
26. What if theatre didn't exist?
27. Why share personal experience through theatre?
28. How can theatre be used to initiate change in politics, social...?
29. How do script-writers express their thoughts and ideas through their plays?
30. What is the best beginning? Ending?
31. What is the best sequence (order) for the dramatic process?