

Essential Questions:

A question is essential when it:

1. causes genuine and relevant inquiry into the big ideas and core content;
 2. provokes deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions;
 3. requires students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas, and justify their answers;
 4. stimulates vital, on-going rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons;
 5. sparks meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences;
- naturally recurs, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects.

What are the traits of an essential question?

- The question probes a matter of considerable importance.
- The question requires movement beyond understanding and studying - some kind of action or resolve - pointing toward the settlement of a challenge, the making of a choice or the forming of a decision.
- The question cannot be answered by a quick and simple “yes” or “no” answer.
- The question probably endures, shifts and evolves with time and changing conditions - offering a moving target in some respects.
- The question may be unanswerable in the ultimate sense.
- The question may frustrate the researcher, may prove arid rather than fertile and may evade the quest for clarity and understanding.

Unfortunately, the term is often bandied about with little rigor, definition or clarity so that many pedestrian and insignificant questions slip in under the term simply because they are large, sweeping and grand in some respects.

Essential questions are not simply BIG questions covering lots of ground.

To trace the decline and fall of the Roman Empire is a grand task, an enormous task, but it hardly makes for an essential question because it lacks focus and fails to move past description to analysis, synthesis or evaluation. If we were to ask instead how our modern state, be it Australia, the United States or Canada, might avoid a decline like the one experienced by the Roman Empire, we would convert mere collecting and description into a much more important and intriguing task.

Essential Questions:

Middle School

Older students continue to work on understanding the characteristics or traits that set particular examples apart as distinguished and special.

- How do we know if a law is just?
- How do we know if a poet, a playwright or a novelist is promising?
- How is a hero different from a celebrity?
- What kinds of harm can be done by fame and fortune?
Older students can also handle complex choices which require the skill of evaluation on **Bloom's Taxonomy**.
- Which of these three poets writes the most powerful and evocative poetry?
- If you were moving to China for two years, which of these six cities would you select?
- Which leader (prime minister, president, etc.) of the previous century did the most to advance the cause of civil rights and liberties?
- Which leader relied the most on propaganda, demagoguery and appeals to fear?
Understanding why life turns out the way it does is another major focus for essential questions at this age.
- Why do you suppose some people can handle being a celebrity without losing their sense of self while others slip into oblivion, drug use and other forms of self destruction?
- Why do some cities and states seem capable of overcoming terrible troubles and misfortune, rising to challenges with grace and courage while others surrender, collapse and give up the fight with a whimper?
- Why do some friends stick by you even during the worst of times while others are quick to flee at the first sign of trouble?
As with the younger students, invention and problem-solving can also inspire questioning and thinking at this middle level.
- What should be done to improve the effectiveness of the United Nations?
- How can our nation best handle the influx of immigrants?
- How can our nation best provide for security without undermining important civil liberties?
- How should the copyright laws be adjusted to take into account the impact of new technologies?
- What should be done about homelessness and poverty?
- What is the best way to balance the need for resource development with protection of the environment?

How can the writing in this essay be improved?