Essential Questions
Connecting Students’ Understanding to the World
What makes a question essential?

Take a moment and write down a working definition of what an essential question is.

Next, share with someone beside you and see what is similar and what is different about your definitions.
## Distinguishing an Essential Question from a Non-Essential Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>Not Essential Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do the arts shape, as well as reflect, a culture?</td>
<td>What common artistic symbols were used by the Incas and the Mayans?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do effective problem solvers do when they get stuck?</td>
<td>What steps did you follow to get your answer?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How strong is the scientific evidence?</td>
<td>What is a variable in scientific investigations?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there ever “just” war?</td>
<td>What key event sparked World War I?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who is a true friend?</td>
<td>Who is Maggie’s best friend in the story?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Essential Questions by Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Studies</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>ELAR</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can we really know what happened in the past?</td>
<td>How accurate (precise) does this solution need to be?</td>
<td>How does what I am reading influence how I should read it?</td>
<td>Is aging a disease?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is worth fighting for?</td>
<td>Is there a pattern?</td>
<td>How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?</td>
<td>How do we decide what to believe about a scientific claim?</td>
</tr>
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</table>
CHARACTERISTICS OF ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
Characteristics

• **Open-ended**; they typically do not have a single, final and/or correct answer

• **Thought-provoking** and **intellectually engaging** that can often spark debate and/or discussion

• **Higher-order thinking** (analysis, inference, evaluation, prediction). These are not recall questions.

• Points toward **important, transferable ideas**

• Raises **additional questions**

• Requires **support and justification**

• Recurs **over time**
How were your definitions similar or different from these characteristics of essential questions?
Purpose of Essential Questions

• We want students to be stimulated to think, to want to know more, and to ask questions about what they are learning. We don’t want them to just answer questions they are asked.
• EQs can be used to frame our key learning goals (our student expectations).
• We want students to connect with the world around them and to wonder about it.
• We want students to strengthen their understanding of a concept.
• We want students to transfer their learning to other concepts, content, etc.
Remember

No question is inherently essential (or trivial, complex or important) It depends on the purpose, audience, and impact.

- What do you intend the students to do with the question?
- How do you intend for them to think?

(Wiggins & McTighe, 110)
Open vs. Guiding

This spells out your intent

- Open questions - No definitive answer is expected, challenges students’ thinking

- Guiding questions - moves students towards a deeper understanding of a big idea, posed as a means of uncovering desired understandings
Topical vs. Overarching

Now that you have your intent…You want a mix between overarching and topical.

• Overarching
  – Limitation: Only overarching is too vague- drift into aimless discussion- won’t link to content
  – Benefit: challenges thinking & connects to the world

• Topical
  – Limitation: Only topical doesn’t facilitate transfer.
  – Benefit: Necessary for focusing on desired unit priorities.
Examples of Topical vs. Overarching Questions

**Topical**
- How did Native Alaskans view the “settlement” of their land?
- How does John Updike use setting to establish a mood?
- How do our various body systems interact?

**Overarching**
- Whose “story” (perspective) is this?
- How do authors use story elements to establish mood?
- What makes a system?
Writing Essential Questions

1. Derive essential questions from state standards.
   - Jeopardy format - given the content you’ll teach (imagine assessments and activities) - what’s the question you’ll answer.

2. Generate a list of questions - put them in kid language.

3. Discuss what makes them essential
   - what should they be thinking about
   - why should they think those things and in that way.

4. Consider the balance between topical and broad questions.
Essential Questions
Video Clip

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yudW9GeyXCE
Let's Practice!!!
References

