



What Is an Essential Question?

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What *is* an essential question? An essential question is - well, *essential*: important, vital, at the heart of the matter - the *essence* of the issue. Think of questions in your life that fit this definition - but don't just yet think about it like a teacher; consider the question as a thoughtful adult. What kinds of questions come to mind? What is a question that any thoughtful and intellectually-alive person ponders and should keep pondering?

In *Understanding by Design* we remind readers that "essential" has a few different connotations:

One meaning of "essential" involves *important questions that recur throughout one's life*. Such questions are broad in scope and timeless by nature. They are perpetually arguable - What is justice? Is art a matter of taste or principles? How far should we tamper with our own biology and chemistry? Is science compatible with religion? Is an author's view privileged in determining the meaning of a text? We may arrive at or be helped to grasp understandings for these questions, but we soon learn that answers to them are invariably provisional. In other words, we are liable to change our minds in response to reflection and experience concerning such questions as we go through life, and that such changes of mind are not only expected but beneficial. A good education is grounded in such life-long questions, even if we sometimes lose sight of them while focusing on content mastery. The big-idea questions signal that education is not just about learning "the answer" but about learning how to learn.

A second connotation for "essential" refers to *key inquiries within a discipline*. Essential questions in this sense are those that point to the big ideas of a subject and to the frontiers of technical knowledge. They are historically important and very much "alive" in the field. "What is healthful eating?" engenders lively debate among nutritionists, physicians, diet promoters, and the general public. "Is any history capable of escaping the social and personal history of its writers?" has been widely and heatedly debated among scholars for the past fifty years, and compels novices and experts alike to ponder potential bias in any historical narrative.

There is a third important connotation for the term "essential" that refers to what is needed for learning core content. In this sense, a question can be considered essential *when it helps students make sense* of important but complicated ideas, knowledge, and know-how - findings that may be understood by experts, but not yet grasped or seen as valuable by the learner. In what ways does light act wave-like? How do the best writers hook and hold their readers? What models best describe a business cycle? By actively exploring such questions, the learner is helped to arrive at important understandings as well as greater coherence in their content knowledge and skill.