

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;
6. naturally recurs, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects.

Here is a variety of subject-area examples of such questions:

How well can fiction reveal truth?

- Why did that particular species/culture/person thrive and that other one barely survive or die?
- How does what we measure influence how we measure? How does how we measure influence what we measure?
- Is there really a difference between a cultural generalization and a stereotype?
- How should this be modeled? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this model? (science, math, social sciences)

Note that an essential question is different from many of the questions teachers typically ask students in class. The most commonly asked question type is factual - a question that seeks "the" correct answer. For example, in a history class, teachers are constantly asking questions to elicit recall or attention to some important content knowledge: "When did the war break out? Who was President at the time? Why, according to the text, did Congress pass that bill?"

Such questions are clearly not "essential" in the sense discussed above. Rather, they are what we might call 'teacherly' questions - a question essential to a teacher who wants students to know an important answer.

Is such a leading question bad? No. There are all sorts of good pedagogical reasons for using a question format to underscore knowledge or to call attention to a forgotten or overlooked idea. But those questions are not "essential" in the sense of signaling genuine, important and necessarily-ongoing inquiries. Teachers have to be careful not to conflate two ideas: "essential to me in my role as a teacher" and "essential to anyone as a thinking person and inquiring student for making meaning of facts in this subject."