

Here are examples of essential questions, organized by subject area, to spark your thinking and clarify these criteria.

### 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 \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., immigration, alcohol and drugs, media) be restricted or regulated? 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 better than counting?
- 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?

### Essential Questions in Art


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


### Essential Questions in Science

- What makes objects move the way they do? Why does this thing move that way?
- 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?
- Where did it go? (with reference to conservation of energy and matter)
- How should we evaluate a scientific claim?
- How can we best measure what we cannot directly see?
- Do the data warrant that otherwise-plausible explanation?
- Is this error an avoidable mistake or inherent in the data?

### Essential Questions in World Languages

- What are the key similarities and the differences between [target language] and English?
- How do I get beyond thinking in English?
- What is the best way for me to retain as much language as possible in long-term memory?
- How might the context help me understand words I do not know?
- What should I do when I am stuck?
- How can I sound more like a native speaker?
- How can I keep the conversation going?
- How can I explore and describe cultures without stereotyping them?

 **Design Tip:** Although you might “get” the idea of essential questions, it doesn’t follow that you will necessarily be able to immediately transfer your understanding and write great essential questions on your own. Practice makes perfect. You have to keep writing and tinkering, and try your ideas out on colleagues and students; before long you’ll have good ones.

 **Design Task:** Brainstorm essential questions based on the big ideas for your unit. Then, check your questions against the criteria for essential questions (the numbered list presented earlier in this module).

### Nonessential (but Important to the *Teacher*) Questions

When you step back and self-assess your brainstormed essential questions against the criteria, you may find, alas, that some turn out not to be essential. Even when we try hard to come up with such questions, they can still end up like these: “What is a linear equation?” or “Why is punctuation important?”—even though the briefest self-assessment against the criteria would reveal that such questions are not essential in our sense. The question you came up with may be essential to your teaching, of course, but that isn’t what we are looking for here. Typical novice-designer questions are often too leading or knowledge focused.