

Writing Essential Questions

David Jakes

The effectiveness of your lesson plan design, and therefore your inquiry-based Project Page, depends on the quality of your **essential question**. As all educators know, effective questioning strategy by teachers is required to promote thinking by students. The ability to ask great questions often separates great teachers from good ones.

Getting Started:

We define essential questions as any question that requires one of the following thought processes:

- a question which requires the student to develop a plan or course of action.
- a question that requires the student to make a decision.

The essential question directs the course of student research. As such, essential questions are powerful, directive and commit students to the process of critical thinking through inquiry. Ultimately, the answer to the essential question will require that students craft a response that involves knowledge construction. This new knowledge building occurs through the integration of discrete pieces of information obtained during the research process. Answers to essential questions are a direct measure of student understanding.

From Point A to B: Avoiding the Simple Question.

Writing questions such as "What is cancer?" simply asks students to move information from one point (the resource) to another (their paper). By asking this type of question, you license the student to plagiarize.

Instead of the above question, we may ask students the essential question: "What plan could you develop that would reduce your likelihood of developing cancer?" This is a more powerful question than "What is cancer" but the question is not yet finished. At this point it is helpful to visualize the answer. In this case, a student could answer this question by developing a list of strategies. They are still moving information.

A much better question is "What plan could you develop that would reduce your likelihood of developing cancer? Your plan can have only two strategies. Defend why you selected those two strategies." In this case, the question requires students to discriminate among the potential list of strategies, and then defend their choice.

More examples:

At this point, it is appropriate to list additional examples of essential questions. Our work with teachers during staff development events indicates that when building Project Pages, framing an essential question is often the most difficult part of the process.

- Is it acceptable to clone human beings? (decision-making)
- What invention of the 20th Century has had the greatest impact? Justify your response (decision-making).
- Who was the greatest home run hitter in baseball history? (decision-making)
- Which credit card should is best for me? (decision-making).

- What plan could be developed to reduce the impact of zebra mussels on the Great Lakes ecosystem? Your plan can include three strategies. (developing an action plan)
- What is the best plan for losing 20 pounds? Your plan can include 3 strategies. (developing an action plan)
- What plan could I use to prepare for a 5K run? The plan can include 2 strategies.(developing an action plan)

Additional Resources on Essential Questions:

[Examples of Essential Questions at Biopoint.com](#)

[Asking the Essential Questions: Curriculum Development](#)

[A Questioning Toolkit: From Now On](#)

[A Collection of Essential Questions from the coalition of Essential Schools](#)

[Framing Essential Questions](#)

[Generating Essential Questions](#)

[Creating Essential Questions from the Galileo Educational Network](#)

[Essential Questions](#)

[The Research Cycle and Essential Questions with examples of essential Questions](#)

[List of Links for Essential Questions](#)

Copyright 2002 by David Jakes and Internet Innovations, Inc. All rights reserved.