

## What Makes a Question “Essential”?

**Part 1:** Examine the following essential questions (1-6) and nonexamples (7-12) to determine the common characteristics of essential questions. List the common characteristics.

Essential Questions	Not Essential Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How are “form” and “function” related in biology?</li> <li>2. How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?</li> <li>3. Who “wins” and who “loses” when technologies change?</li> <li>4. Should it be an axiom if it is not obvious?</li> <li>5. What distinguishes fluent foreigners from native speakers?</li> <li>6. How would life be different if we couldn’t measure time?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. How many legs does a spider have? How does an elephant use its trunk?</li> <li>8. What is “foreshadowing”? Can you find an example of foreshadowing in the story?</li> <li>9. What is the original meaning of the term <i>technology</i> (from its Greek root, <i>techne</i>)?</li> <li>10. By what axioms are we able to prove the Pythagorean theorem?</li> <li>11. What are some French colloquialisms?</li> <li>12. How many minutes are in an hour? How many hours are in a day?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Common characteristics of essential questions:</b></p>     	

**Part 2:** Test your theory about essential questions by deciding which of the following questions (13-18) are essential, using your list of characteristics as criteria. Mark yes if it is an essential question or no if it’s not.

	YES	NO
13. What is the relationship between popularity and greatness in literature?	_____	_____
14. When was the Magna Carta signed?	_____	_____
15. Crustaceans—what’s up with that?	_____	_____
16. Which U.S. president has the most disappointing legacy?	_____	_____
17. To what extent are common sense and science related?	_____	_____
18. What’s the pattern?	_____	_____

**Part 3:** Review the answer key and explanations; revise your description of essential questions.

Answers:

13. Yes—Open-ended, thought provoking; supports inquiry, discussion, and debate.
14. No—A fact question with a single “correct” answer.
15. No—Somewhat open, but does not necessarily point toward any important ideas.
16. Yes—Open-ended, thought provoking; supports inquiry, discussion, and debate *with* follow-up prompts (e.g., Why? What’s your reasoning? Support your choice).
17. Yes—Open-ended, thought provoking; supports inquiry and discussion.
18. Maybe—Not an essential question *if* it points to a correct answer (e.g., 1, 2, 4, 8, 14, \_\_\_), but could be *if* the students are given complex data with no obvious pattern; in this case, students will need to use reasoning to make and test inferences.

**Revised descriptions for common characteristics of essential questions:**