

A Primer on Guiding Questions

By Kathy Glass

Units of study are framed by **unit** guiding questions that are an expression of the essential understandings. A series of **lesson** guiding questions are meant to aid teachers in getting students to understand the overarching unit guiding questions.

RATIONALE: Many educational experts have written about and support the use of guiding questions as a cornerstone of teaching. Using them is not a novel educational idea, but a sound one.

- Essential questions are “a critical driver for teaching and learning. They engage students in the study and create a bridge between performance-based activities and deeper, conceptual understandings.” (*Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction* by L. Erickson)
- Heidi Hayes Jacobs states: “The essential question is conceptual commitment. In a sense you are saying, ‘This is our focus for learning. I will put my teaching skills into helping my students examine the key concept implicit in the essential question.’”
- Wiggins and McTighe write: “[The purpose is] to frame the learning, engage the learner, link to more specific or more general questions, and guide the exploration and uncovering of important ideas.” (*Understanding by Design*)

DIFFERENTIATION: Differentiated classrooms are prime candidates for using essential unit questions so that the different activities teachers devise for individuals and groups of students have the same overarching focus. Too often basic level students are relegated to drill and kill methods, whereas the high achievers get the advantage of more sophisticated and intriguing curriculum. Creating and using guiding questions keep teachers focused on learning goals for all students so they can plan equally engaging curriculum that satisfy diverse tasks.

ANALOGY: Guiding questions are like the spine, and the lessons and assessments like vertebrae. These questions provide the framework necessary to make meaning and connections for students from each learning opportunity instead of presenting lessons, activities, and assessments in isolation.

HOW DO TEACHERS USE GUIDING QUESTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM?

1. **Focus lessons, activities, and assessments around guiding questions.**

Guiding questions help set the purpose for teaching and learning, so make sure that each lesson you conduct, each activity you ask students to complete, and each assessment you devise all answer a guiding question. Remember the analogy of the guiding questions as the spine and the lessons and activities as the vertebrae. Without the spine to serve as a foundation, the vertebrae are unhinged and disconnected.

The unit guiding questions are the same for all students, but an activity or assessment in response to these questions can be differentiated. Teachers use the lesson guiding questions as a guide and can modify or extend learning to meet students’ unique needs.

2. **Display and present the guiding questions.**

Whereas an individual lesson guiding question can be written on an interactive device or whiteboard to set the purpose for a particular lesson, clearly post a list of the unit guiding questions for the duration of the unit. Displaying them helps to remind students of the overarching unit goals and provides context. Here are some logistical options for posting **unit guiding questions**:

- Write them on poster board or an easel pad.
- Create a typed page of the unit questions and enlarge it at a copy shop. Display it on a bulletin board or affix magnets or Velcro on the back of tagboard and post the questions on the whiteboard.

Options for presenting the questions:

- a) Sometimes teachers post the guiding questions at the beginning of the unit and share them with students immediately to set the purpose for learning.

- b) Another option is to begin the unit by investing students in the task of creating questions, and then post them. For example, ask students to brainstorm questions they might want to answer within the unit. To take this approach, say: “We’re beginning a unit on *religions of the world* (or *weather* or the *American Revolution* or *heroes*). What questions would you want to investigate under this topic?” Then, include their relevant questions as unit or lesson guiding questions and post them.
- c) In another scenario, conduct a lab experiment, demonstration, or simulation first that captures students’ interest. Afterwards, introduce and then post the unit guiding questions and connect the lab, demo, or activity to one or more questions.

3. Use unit and lesson questions to set objectives and sequence your unit. Setting clearly defined objectives and sharing them with students is critical to effective teaching. Use both the unit and specific lesson guiding questions to state objectives and communicate the focus of the content. You might begin a lesson this way:

“We have been studying about the elements of literature. Today and tomorrow we will focus on the unit guiding question: *How does setting affect the characters?*” (Point to the unit question that is displayed.)

“Today we’ll begin to tackle this question by answering: *What is the setting of this novel?*” (Point to this lesson guiding question that is written under the day’s agenda.)

Teachers pose questions to help students begin thinking about answers which can almost intuitively get their brains churning. Plus, teachers can introduce these questions in a compelling way to rouse interest. For instance, teachers might pose each question and share a brief story, show a picture that is eye-catching, or conduct a simulation to foster connections and intrigue. As teachers write and conduct a series of lesson guiding questions associated with each unit question, it provides a fluid orchestration of how a unit is sequenced.

Final Note: Use standards as a guide to formulate a concept-based curriculum that is spearheaded by unit and lesson questions. The structure of each lesson can vary from school to school; however, all teachers hold themselves accountable to creating and conducting differentiated lessons, activities, and assessments in response to these standards-based questions. When students can respond coherently and accurately to the unit guiding questions and demonstrate what they learned, then teachers should feel satisfied that unit goals are met. To this point, summative assessments call upon students to respond to all unit guiding questions. Formative assessments address the lesson guiding questions to prepare for this summative assessment.

Unit and Lesson Guiding Question Examples

Unit Guiding Questions	Lesson Guiding Questions
#1: How does setting affect characters?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Lesson 1.1</u>: What is the definition for setting? What are the major settings in <i>The Giver</i>? • <u>Lesson 1.2</u>: How does the community affect different characters’ actions, thoughts, or beliefs?
#2: How do authors develop characters?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Lesson 2.1</u>: What is characterization? What are the methods of characterization? • <u>Lesson 2.2</u> (ongoing): How does Lois Lowry use methods of characterization to develop the character of the Giver, Gabe, and Jonas?
#3: How does mood influence the plot?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Lesson 3.1</u>: What is mood? How do authors create mood? • <u>Lesson 3.2</u> (ongoing): What are examples from the text where mood influences the plot?

UNIT AND LESSON GUIDING QUESTIONS

Distinguishing Features	
Unit Guiding Questions	Lesson Guiding Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are written in general terms with no proper nouns. • Include present tense verbs. • Include at least one concept or maybe two that form a relationship. • Begin with <i>why</i> or <i>how</i>. • Cannot be answered with a list or finite response; these questions are more provocative and engaging than the straightforward, factually based lesson guiding question. • Can foster transference and connections as students relate the questions to other units of study, other text, the world, or personally. • Are featured prominently on poster board or chart paper in the classroom and kept up all unit long. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be written to elicit factual information specific to a unit of study, so references to characters, historical events or figures, titles of books, or particular places are fair game. • Include at least one skill or concept for each question. • Begin with any type of question: <i>who, what, where, when, why/how, is, does</i>. • Are foundational as they serve to support the unit question; when teachers conduct lessons associated with all the lesson guiding questions, students should be prepared to demonstrate understanding of the overarching, associated essential unit question. • Are posted individually as the lesson objective for the day(s) on the whiteboard, SMART Board, or easel.
Common Features	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logical order. Both types of questions are sequential, so write unit questions that are scaffolded; begin with the less complex to the most in-depth. By the same token, write the associated lesson guiding questions for each unit question in an order for teaching. The only caveat is that you might return to unit guiding questions throughout the course of study. For example, a unit question such as <i>How do characters change throughout time?</i> would be revisited frequently throughout a novel and more than once throughout a short story as characters show change as a result of different factors. The same idea applies to unit questions around reading strategies, such as <i>How can readers use questioning to gain more meaning from the text?</i> • Appropriate timing. You must consider how much time is available to teach a unit and plan the number of questions accordingly. • Language. It is important that students for whom you are writing this unit can read and understand the words in your questions. However, if you include a concept term that you will expose them to and use it as the basis for instruction, then by all means add it (e.g., <i>interdependence, cultural diffusion</i>). • Distinction. Make sure that there is no overlap among your questions. If there is too much similarity, combine questions or choose the strongest one. Each question—unit or lesson—should stand alone. • Visibility. Whereas the unit questions are posted and remain visible throughout the entire unit, the lesson questions are featured for each lesson to set the stage, so write them on the whiteboard or interactive board. The commonality is that they are both clearly in the students' line of vision. 	

from *Mapping Comprehensive Units to the ELA Common Core* by Kathy Glass