

# Voices Rising

Assimilation and the American Experience  
A Teaching American History grant

## Essential Questions

*"Teaching the answers without first raising the questions takes most of the meaning out of learning."*

Francis Slater, London School of Education

A key ingredient in developing a project-based unit is the essential question that guides and focuses the development of the unit. Unlike topics, essential questions are conceptual in nature and not based upon students learning just a set of facts. Essential questions tie facts and information to a larger concept, providing deeper understanding to students who can then apply that concept to many situations.

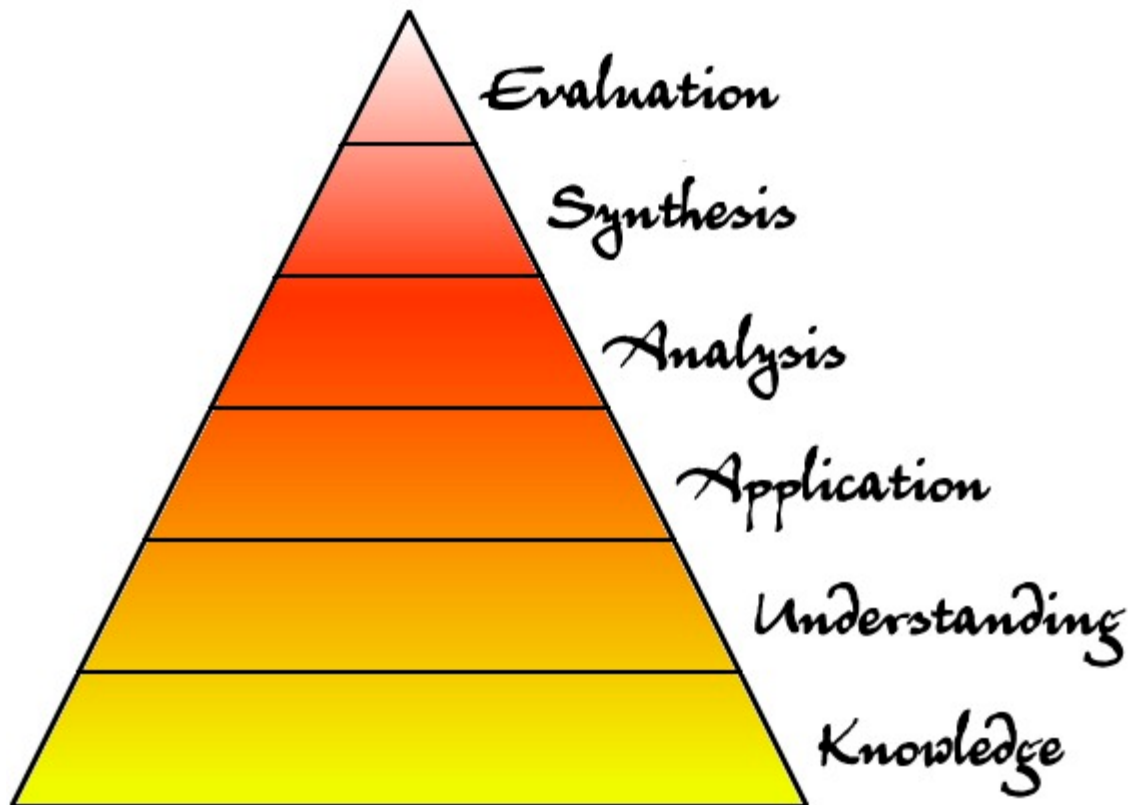
An essential question should prompt students to investigate facts, research and analyze data and evidence, and draw conclusions from their findings to develop a thorough detailed response. "Essential questions frame the research; they require students to make decisions and plan courses of action" (*Jakes et. al, [www.biopoint.com](http://www.biopoint.com), 2002*). Students should also be able to support their conclusions by presenting all the evidence they have gathered throughout the process. This can be done by having students produce some kind of product (e.g., oral or multimedia presentation, model, debate, etc.) that illustrates their full understanding of the theme or topic.

# Voices Rising

Assimilation and the American Experience  
A Teaching American History grant

## Essential Questions reside at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy

Students are required to EVALUATE (make a thoughtful choice between options, with the choice based upon clearly stated criteria), to SYNTHESIZE (invent a new or different version), or to ANALYZE (develop a thorough and complex understanding through skillful questioning). (McKenzie, 1995)



As teachers we tend to ask questions in the "knowledge" category 80% to 90% of the time. These questions are not bad, but using them all the time is. Try to utilize a higher-order level of questions. These questions require much more "brain power" and a more extensive and elaborate answer. (Bloom et al., 1956)

# Voices Rising

Assimilation and the American Experience  
*A Teaching American History grant*

Evaluation		
Synthesis		
Analysis		
Application		
Comprehension		
Knowledge		

# Voices Rising

Assimilation and the American Experience  
A *Teaching American History* grant

## **Other characteristics of essential questions:**

- Essential questions beg students to investigate through curiosity and inquiry.
- There is no one right answer to an essential question; it's not like a student can "look up" the answer to an essential question.
- Answering such questions may take a life time, and even then, the answers may only be "temporary."
- Essential questions engage students in the kinds of real-life applied problem-solving suggested by nearly every new curriculum report or outline curriculum standards such as the NCTM and the Science Standards.
- Essential questions usually lend themselves well to multidisciplinary investigations.

Source: McKenzie, Jamie. *Framing Essential Questions*. From Now On. September 1996.  
<<http://www.fno.org/sept96/questions.html>>