The essential question for a unit/study focus can be created from the enduring understanding by using either “How” or “Why” (e.g. in front of the enduring understanding).

To create an enduring understanding from the CCSS, go to the subject document, your grade level and the overall expectation that you will be addressing in your teaching. Within each area you will find ‘embedded concepts’ or ‘processes’ (e.g. Gr. 6 character, perspective). Use a powerful verb (see list of some possibilities on p.3) to connect them and you will have created an enduring understanding.

Transform this into an essential question to drive the unit by using either “How” or “Why” in front of the enduring understanding. This question will shape and drive your teacher & student learning throughout the inquiry. Students will have multiple opportunities using multiple means to demonstrate their thinking, knowledge and understanding in respect to the essential question. The ‘culminating task’ could link back to the essential question and ask students to use everything that they have learned and experienced to try to answer the question. Note that the essential question is an inquiry based, higher level thinking question and we should therefore expect and accept differentiated responses. There will not be a single right response but there will be levelled responses of which the most successful might demonstrate: use of extended thinking, effective communication skills, and perhaps components of the success criteria/anchor chart/rubric. Students should be given opportunities to demonstrate their thinking, knowledge and understanding using the Write-Say-Do ‘Universal Design Model’. Also, classrooms that develop and make use of co-created anchor charts will further support successful student achievement.

Use the essential question to inform your unit design: What knowledge & information will the students need to be able to answer the essential question? Also, reflect on the skills they may require to be able to access the required information, and the major conceptual and procedural understanding that students must master to address the EQ and achieve the EU. By using an essential question you will stay focused on the core concepts, processes and understandings to be achieved in the unit.

Design a culminating or summative task that is reflective of your essential question and that directly addresses it.
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(e.g. For a cross-curricular inquiry unit, begin designing your essential question by looking at the social studies/history/geography curriculum. Develop the unit based on an essential question(s). Cross reference other curriculum areas to make connections and create richer tasks. Design multiple assessment and evaluation tasks.

- Consider posting the essential question in your classroom before beginning a unit of study. This allows your students to know the expected learning before beginning the unit.

Samples:

Kindergarten:
- A sense of identity /creates a positive self image.
- How/Why does a sense of identity create a positive self image?

Grade One:
- Relationships, rules and responsibilities / change over time.
- How/Why do relationships, rules and responsibilities change over time?

Grade Two:
- Various cultures of individuals and groups / contribute to the local community.
- How/Why do various cultures of individuals and groups contribute to the local community?

Grade Three:
- Life in early settler communities / compared to the present day communities.
- How/Why does life in early settler communities compare to the present day communities?

Grade Four:
- Elements of medieval societies / relate to contemporary Canadian communities.
- How/why do elements of medieval societies relate to contemporary Canadian communities?

Grade Five:
- Innovations of early civilizations / influenced the modern world.
- How/Why do innovations of early civilizations influence the modern world?

Grade Six:
- Interactions between First Nations peoples and European explorers / created disagreements.
- How/Why did interactions between First Nations peoples and European explorers create disagreements?

Grade Seven:
- Canada of 1867 / compared to the Canada of today, politically and socially.
- How/Why does Canada of 1867 compare to the Canada of today, politically and socially?
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Grade Eight
- Factors affect migration, trends and patterns of migration in Canada.
- How/Why do factors affect migration, trends and patterns of migration in Canada?

Grade Nine
- Regional differences in Canada are illustrated through the concept of ecozone.
- How/Why are the regional differences in Canada illustrated through the concept of ecozone?

Grade Ten
- Major local, national, and global forces and events have influenced Canada’s policies and Canadian identity since 1914.
- How/Why have major local, national and global forces and events influenced Canada’s policies and Canadian identity since 1914?

Some Possible Powerful/Hot Verbs (e.g. from Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy):
- Affects, Interacts, Defines, Applies, Links, Creates
- Influences, Reflects, Relates, Causes, Engenders, Demonstrates

Some tips to creating/using inquiry based learning and essential questions:
- Align the inquiry with an established/known disciplinary concepts or character traits you wish to cultivate (e.g.)
  - Respect, Empathy, Teamwork
  - Responsibility, Kindness and Caring, Fairness
  - Honesty, Co-operation, Integrity
  - Perseverance
- Get the students to select a hot verb (e.g. creates) and add it to the character trait (e.g. respect).
  - Enduring Understanding: Respect creates an atmosphere of trust and risk taking.
  - Essential Question: How and in what forms does respect best create an atmosphere of trust and risk taking?
  - This exercise helps them to consider big ideas which can, over time and with many opportunities to be exposed to examples, begin to form an “enduring understanding”.
- If your school has developed a ‘shared responsibility model’ (e.g. common commitment to best practice, collaboration and a continuum of learning), students will become increasingly familiar with the idea of using inquiry-based learning/essential questions for meaningful and enduring understanding. With practice and support students can become active agents for learning as they participate in co-creating essential questions using the “concept-verb-concept” formula as well as independently using inquiry thinking in response to learning.