

# **THE RESEARCH ESSAY KIT**

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## THE RESEARCH ESSAY KIT

As you work through the process of writing your research essay, keep this toolkit handy to help keep you organized and on track!

### Step One: Selecting a Topic and Preparing inquiry Questions

- A) Although this may seem like the easiest step in preparing your essay, it is probably the most important. Select your topic carefully. You will enjoy the task of researching and writing a history essay and will be much more successful if you are working on a topic that is of interest to you. Your teacher may provide you with a list of suggested topics or you may want to skim through your textbook for ideas.

**The Topic I have chosen is:** \_\_\_\_\_

- B) Inquiry Questions: Focusing Your Research

Often topics selected by students are quite broad in nature. Narrow your focus so you are not overwhelmed by mounds of information or aimlessly gathering information with no focus. Inquiry questions can help you to narrow your focus and thereby allow you to be more efficient in conducting your research. For example, searching for information on World War II is far too broad; however, researching the role of Canada in developing the nuclear bomb is a focused, manageable topic. Inquiry questions are most effective when they are created following some brief initial research. Having selected a topic, read a few relevant pages in your textbook or in an encyclopedia. As you read, think of questions you would like to explore further. Prepare a list of five inquiry questions. (Note: These questions should be analytical in nature and not merely require a factual response.)

Inquiry Question #1: \_\_\_\_\_

Inquiry Question #2: \_\_\_\_\_

Inquiry Question #3: \_\_\_\_\_

Inquiry Question #4: \_\_\_\_\_

Inquiry Question #5: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Step Two: Preparing a Bibliography**

Building a strong bibliography is a critical step in preparing to write a research essay. You must examine a variety of sources for your research to be valid. Relying on one or two sources does not allow you to see a variety of viewpoints or to see if the source you are using has a particular bias. When building your bibliography, try to include both primary and secondary sources. Also, Try to use a variety of sources of information including:

- print sources (books, journals, newspapers, etc.)
- videos
- interviews with people who remember or experienced the event
- electronic sources of information (CD-ROMs, Web sites)

A gold mine for historical researchers is all of the work done by other researchers. Most history books include a bibliography of sources and notes (endnotes, footnotes, or internal citations). Scan these to see what relevant sources are available on your topic. If you find a reference to the topic you are researching that is documented, check the citation (footnote or endnote) – it may give you a great lead for a useful source.

### ***Primary Sources***

A primary source is something recorded at the time of the event. Primary sources include diaries, newspaper articles, government documents, oral interviews, film recording an event live, and so on. Primary documents give us a firsthand account of the event but often provide either limited analysis or may carry the bias of the person reporting/recording the event.

### ***Secondary Sources***

Secondary sources tell us about past events. They are secondhand accounts. Secondary sources are interpretations of the past and may carry a bias or may retell selected parts of the past. They are good sources to begin with in preparing to write a research paper as secondary sources can quickly establish a context. Your textbook is an example of a secondary source. Other samples of secondary sources include books about an event or time period, encyclopedias, documentaries, and CD-ROMs.

### ***Internet Sources***

The internet is a valuable tool that can help you find information on just about any topic. But when using information from the internet, you must make sure that the Web site you have chosen is factually accurate, up to date, and free from bias. As an Internet user, you must remember that the internet is not governed or “watched” by any group. Therefore, there is no limit to the kind of information that you will find, there is also the potential to come across Web sites that are factually inaccurate, biased, and poor in quality. Unless you are using the Web sites of well-known and established institutions and organizations, you must be very cautious in using the Internet as a source of information.

When trying to determine if the particular Web site is an accurate source to use for your research, answer the following questions:

- Who is providing the information on the Web site?
- Why are they providing this information?
- Where did their information come from?
- How does the information on this Web site compare to what you already know?
- How old is the information on the Web site?
- When was the Web site last updated or modified?
- Does the information contain any noticeable biases?
- Did someone that you respect recommend this site to you (i.e., a teacher or a librarian)?

### ***Begin with an Extensive Working Bibliography***

When compiling a list of sources from which to gather your research, begin with an extensive “working” bibliography of 10 to 15 sources. A working bibliography is a list of sources that may be useful in researching your topic. It also assures you that there is ample information available to you. Once you have compiled your working bibliography, locate each source, and scan it briefly to see if the source is relevant, understandable, and useful to you in completing your research.

### ***Use Oral History Where Possible***

Do not forget that people who experienced the past are an invaluable source of information. If you know of anyone who lived through the period you are researching, be sure to arrange an interview to get their perspective on the topic.

### ***Use visual sources Such as Historical Photographs and Political Cartoons***

Much can be learned about the past through historical photographs and political cartoons. Sources with many visuals are much more interesting to work from and can help you visualize the information you are reading about. Carefully examine cartoons and photographs to see what they can reveal about the time period you are studying.

### ***Use Film, Music, Literature and Art for Insights into the Past***

Documentaries provide insightful information on many topics. Music, literature and visual arts can also provide insights into the issues and attitudes of a generation. Do not limit your sources to the traditional print materials.

### ***Make Effective Use of the Table of Contents and Index***

Once you have narrowed your sources down to those most useful and you are ready to begin making research notes. The table of contents and the index in a book are vital tools to the researcher. Skim the table of contents to find relevant chapters and look for specific topics in the index. It can save you a great deal of time.

### ***Use Key Words and Phrases When Doing Electronic Searches***

Much like the table of contents and index indispensable tools so is the ability to use key words and phrases when using electronic sources.

**Consider Who Wrote Each Source You Use and What Biases They May Have**

As you are doing your research be sure to reflect on the source of information. Does the author have a bias? Have you used a variety of sources to ensure that you have examined different viewpoints? When you find conflicting interpretations, consider the evidence used to support the point of view and the consistency with other sources. Remember, using just one source is a book review. A properly researched essay must draw on a variety of sources by a variety of authors.

**Some Guidelines for preparing your Bibliography**

1. Do not number a bibliography.
2. Arrange sources in your bibliography alphabetically.
3. Include the name of the author, the title, where the source was published, the name of the publisher, and the year published.
4. Underline or italicize titles.
5. Always follow an acceptable format for a bibliography. Ask your teacher which format to use.

**You Are Ready to Build Your Bibliography!**

List five to seven different sources you can use in carrying out your research. Remember to list them alphabetically (and remember to include at least one Web site).

Source #1:

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This source will be useful to me in completing my research because:

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Source #2:

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This source will be useful to me in completing my research because:

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Source #3:

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This source will be useful to me in completing my research because:

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Source #4:

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This source will be useful to me in completing my research because:

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Source #5:

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This source will be useful to me in completing my research because:

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Source #6:

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This source will be useful to me in completing my research because:

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Source #7:

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This source will be useful to me in completing my research because:

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### Step Three: Completing the Research

Now that you have selected a topic, narrowed your focus through inquiry questions, and prepared a bibliography that includes a variety of sources, you are ready to begin preparing research notes.

#### *Database or Cue Cards? You Decide*

Perhaps the most effective and efficient way to record your research notes is to enter the information into a database. If you are unfamiliar with how to use a database, ask your teacher librarian for some assistance

Another effective and easy method to organize and make research notes is by using cue cards. By putting only one main point on each cue card you will be able to easily place the information in the order in which you intend to develop your essay (once you have prepared an essay outline). Below is a sample of how to use the cue cards. You will need to complete several cue cards to have sufficient research.

#### SAMPLE CUE CARD TEMPLATES

Source: _____
Section of Essay: _____
Page(s): _____
Main point: _____

Source: _____
Section of Essay: _____
Page(s): _____
Main point: _____

**SAMPLE CUE CARD**

Include the page number; necessary for proper documentation

Only the title is necessary. Other details are contained in the bibliography.

This section is filled in when research is complete and the essay outline is developed. This allows for the easy organization of ideas under subheadings.

<b>Source:</b>	Canada's First Nations
<b>Section of Essay:</b>	D
<b>Page(s):</b>	205
<b>Main point:</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rivalry between Kutenai and Blackfoot confederacy predated arrival of Europeans</li> <li>• Kutenai trade mostly horses</li> <li>• slowly the Kutenai managed to obtain guns</li> </ul>

Each card should contain information about only one topic.

**Step Four: Determining Your Thesis and Preparing an Essay Outline**

You are nearly ready to begin writing your essay! You now have the information required on which to base your essay. The final two steps prior to writing are drafting a thesis and preparing an essay outline.

**Formulating a Thesis**

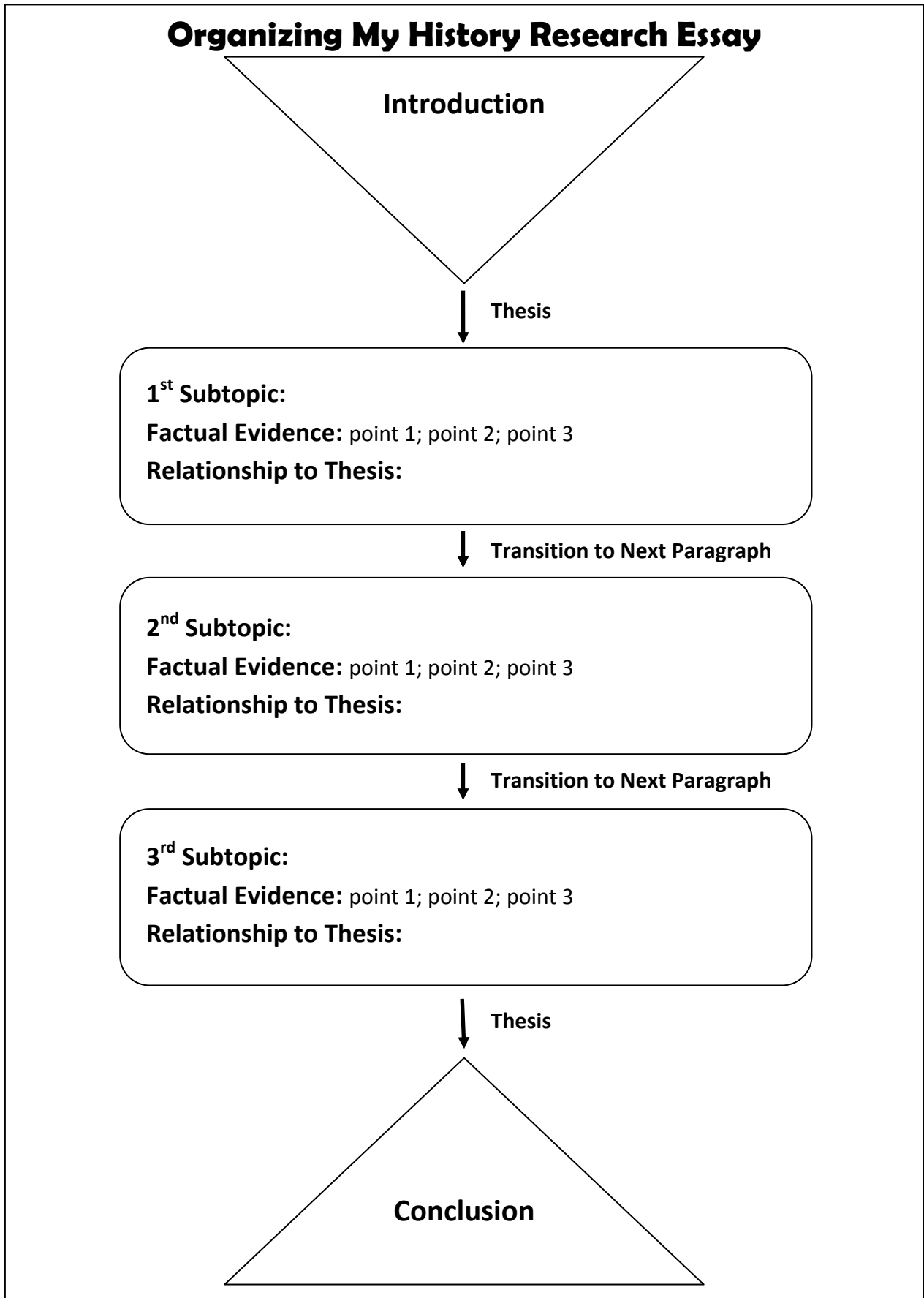
A thesis is a statement of intent that clearly defines the arguments presented in the essay. A good thesis does not merely identify the topic or state the obvious; it sets out an argument in one or two sentences. To be effective, a thesis must not only be clearly stated in the introduction but also should be the central focus of the entire essay. The purpose of the evidence presented throughout the essay is to support the thesis. An effective thesis is always formulated after the research is complete or nearly complete based on the evidence gathered, not on the writer's bias.

**Weak Thesis:** The Great Depression was a difficult period for many Canadians. (This is too obvious and there is no issue to be proven.)

**Strong Thesis:** The Great Depression exposed the weaknesses of the capitalist economy and forced governments to become more directly involved in managing the Canadian economy. (This thesis takes a stand on an issue that could be debated. The author now needs to provide evidence to support his/her claim.)



Preparing an Essay Outline

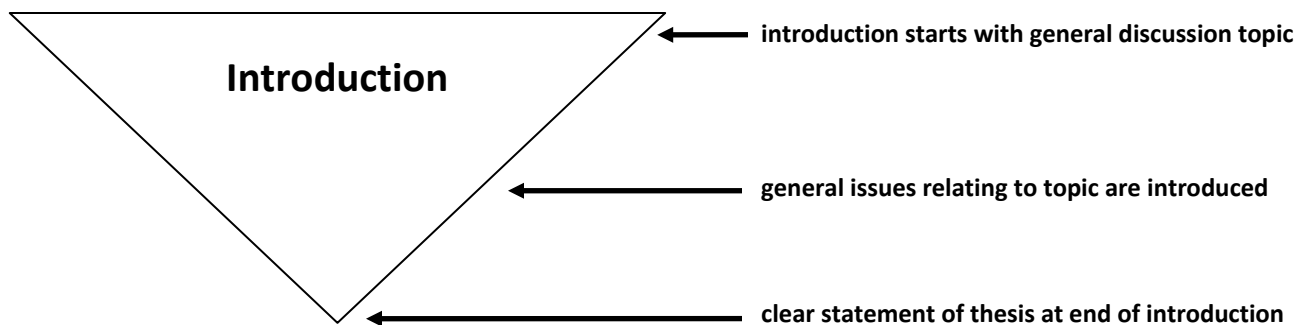


### Step Five: Writing the History Essay

A strong history essay opens with an effective introduction that establishes the topic, the nature of the issue to be discussed, and the essay's central thesis. The introduction is followed by a series of paragraphs that directly relate to the thesis and provide historical evidence and analysis that support the thesis. An effective conclusion restates the thesis, connects the main arguments to the thesis, and brings the essay to a close.

#### *Writing an Effective Introduction*

The introduction broadly sets the context for the essay and identifies the issue to be discussed. It clearly defines the topic and the thesis. An effective way to write a good introduction is to follow the “upside-down pyramid” approach.



#### *Writing an effective Essay Body: Keeping Your Thesis at the Forefront of Your Essay*

The body of the essay comprises a series of arguments that support the thesis statement. Each argument should be dealt with in a separate paragraph. Each paragraph should begin with a clear topic sentence that explains the argument. A minimum of three arguments should be developed to support the thesis statement.

To ensure all your hard work pays off in an excellent essay, you will need to make sure you make effective use of your research to support your thesis. For each argument or paragraph carefully consider what historical evidence you will use and how you will relate this information to your thesis. Use this model as a guide to ensure your essay has sound analysis.

Thesis: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **First Argument**

Historical Evidence:

How will I relate the historical evidence to my thesis?

**Second Argument**

Historical Evidence:

How will I relate the historical evidence to my thesis?

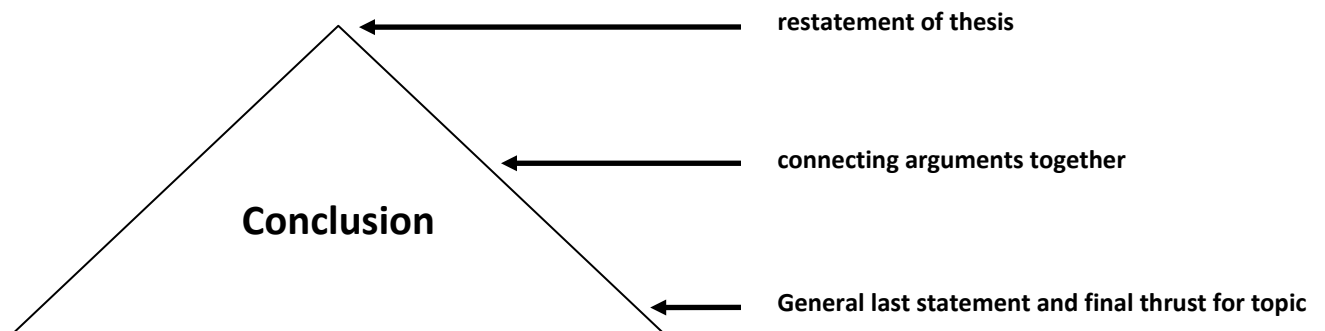
**Third Argument**

Historical Evidence:

How will I relate the historical evidence to my thesis?

***Writing Effective Conclusions***

The conclusion restates the thesis you set out to prove and then connects each of the arguments that have been developed to support the thesis. In a good conclusion, the reader could read only the conclusion and still get a clear sense of what the thesis is and how it was supported and argued in the essay. A good conclusion can be written using the “pyramid” approach.



### **Documenting Your History Essay: Answers to Common Questions about Notes and Bibliographies**

Any idea or information that you use in your essay that is borrowed from other sources must be given credit in your essay. This documenting of sources can be done in a variety of ways. Ask your teacher which method they want you to use.

#### **1. What are bibliographies and notes?**

A bibliography is a list of sources consulted in the preparation of a paper. It does not indicate where the facts and ideas came from. Notes (footnotes or endnotes) cite the specific sources from which ideas or facts came.

#### **2. What is the difference between a working bibliography and an annotated bibliography?**

A working bibliography is the result of preliminary research or resources to determine whether enough sources are available to pursue a topic. Preparing a working bibliography does not mean that you have to use all of the sources; it simply is a list to show that they exist.

An annotated bibliography is a preliminary assessment of the potential value of the sources gathered. It can be compiled only after the researcher has consulted these resources.

#### **3. What is the correct format for a bibliography? What sources should it list?**

A bibliography should include all the relevant sources consulted in researching an essay and should not be limited to sources cited in the notes. A bibliography is organized alphabetically according to the author's last name, and the entries are not numbered. Below are a few examples of bibliographical entries.

##### Journal

Pritchett, W. Paul. "Understanding Our Social Safety Net." *American Journal of Archeology*. Vol. 79 (1999): 68-75.

##### Book

Newman, Garfield, and Cynthia Grenier. *Impact: Western Civilization and the Wider World*. Whitby: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1996.

#### **4. When are notes required?**

Notes are used to indicate the source from which facts are drawn or to give credit for ideas borrowed from other writers. There are three main occasions when one must use notes:

- a. When citing specific facts.
- b. When borrowing ideas from another writer.
- c. When explaining or expanding on a term or a concept outside the body of the text. This is called an explanatory note.

**5. How many notes should an essay have?**

There is no rule for the number of notes in an essay; they should be used as necessary, following the guidelines listed above.

**6. How does the format of a note differ from the format of a bibliography?**

Notes appear in the order that they appear in the text. Unlike a bibliographical entry, notes are numbered, the author's first name appears first, parentheses are used, the punctuation is slightly different, and the page number appears at the end. Following is a sample note.

1. Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages and Discoveries* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987), 68.

**7. What is the difference between a footnote and an endnote?**

Endnotes appear at the end of the essay. Footnotes appear at the bottom of each page. Ask your teacher about what type of notes he or she would like – do they want footnotes or endnotes?

**8. What does "ibid." mean? When should I use it?**

"Ibid." is the abbreviation for *ibidem*, a Latin word meaning "in the same place," or "same as above." It is used when citing the same source as was cited directly above. When using *ibid.*, include the page number.

**9. If I cite a source more than once, do I have to cite it in full and give a complete citation every time I use it?**

No, it is acceptable to simply cite the author and page number for subsequent entries. If you have used more than one source by the same author, cite the author, short title, and page number.