The first step on this path is to stop and reflect on your thinking about the issue or problem you are investigating. Your ideas may not be very clear or very well informed at this stage, but thinking about them and writing them down gives you a place to start recognising what you need to know next.

- See the Learning Centre’s guide to Reflective writing

Reading then becomes the way you deepen your understanding. It is also when you start to document how all these other ideas help you identify how and why you think the way you do. Selecting which ideas you will use in your assignment and organising your citations is the beginning of the referencing process. Your note making practice makes this possible. Without it you have no map of the path of your developing understanding.

- See the Learning Centre’s guides to Effective reading and Effective notemaking from written text

The skills of summarising and paraphrasing need to be exercised at this stage. If you cut and paste directly from your readings, you are plagiarising. Time can get away from you and you end up not thinking about your writing and just ‘popping’ the words of others into your assignment. Summarising and paraphrasing take more time, but they are well worth the work and are excellent academic practices.

- See the Learning Centre guides to Paraphrasing, summarising and quoting and Introducing quotations and paraphrases

Writing takes practice and often your first draft is submitted with disastrous results. Your first attempt will usually be disorganised and will need to be redrafted, but as you become more practiced and better informed you will begin to develop your own writing style, your own voice.

Another step on this path to good academic practice is the discovery of the way people talk, think and communicate in the subjects you are studying. It is similar to working in another country. You need to learn the variations of the language, the different ways of writing and speaking about that particular world. It is for this reason that different values are given to academic ideas in different subjects, and that different skills are used to emphasise those values. You will learn about this culture from your lecturers and tutors, from your readings and also by developing your academic practices, one of which is referencing.

Importantly, time management will be a crucial part of your academic journey to avoid plagiarising. Reading well, note making, summarising and paraphrasing, writing, learning the culture of your discipline as well as becoming familiar with referencing conventions, all take time. It is definitely worth the effort to plan your time efficiently.

- See the Learning Centre’s guide to Time management

See next: Getting organised