It is difficult to define plagiarism, but here is a working definition: Plagiarism is the misappropriation (theft) of another author’s contributions, including an author’s ideas, information, or words. Plagiarizing may consist of copying unusual phrases or terms; sentences or significant parts of sentences; or the organization of a sentence or paragraph.

Some students do not know what plagiarism is. When I first began using the following exercise with my graduate students in Plant Pathology, some international students expressed deep gratitude, saying that it was the first time that anyone had explained plagiarism, and its centrality to the U. S. academic system. It is not always easy to identify a case of plagiarism because the definition of plagiarism varies slightly between academic disciplines. A paragraph considered to be plagiarism by journalism students might not be considered plagiarism by biology students. To overcome this ambiguity, it is essential to have discussions of the topic between faculty and students, in whatever discipline they find themselves. It is possible to avoid plagiarism, even when the topic is challenging, as the following example attests. I once had a Chinese graduate student who knew little English but ended up being the best writer I have ever had. While the student's grammar was poor, her ideas were excellent. She forgot about grammar and focused instead on logical, reasoned arguments. Students should try to express their ideas in whatever words are natural for them, and then worrying about grammar later. To write well and avoid plagiarism, focus on insights, not grammar. Here are eight rules of thumb to follow:

1. Read the text.
2. Think about it. What did the authors say? How does it relate to the topic you are writing about?
3. Put it aside!
4. Using your own language and style (whatever it is), write out what you want to say.
5. Add proper citations by citing all ideas or information taken from another author. Check for accuracy.
6. Do not quote unless absolutely necessary. If you must quote, make sure the quote is exact, use quotation marks and cite.
7. Do not paraphrase. There are very few situations in scientific writing where it is necessary or appropriate. Note: A citation, such as Johal et al. (1995), gives credit for information and ideas. It is insufficient to give credit for writing!
8. (If you are writing in a non-English language), do all of the above in your native tongue, and then translate your work into English. Fix the grammar.

Plagiarism exercise
Read the following quotation.
A class of maize mutants, collectively known as disease lesion mimics, display discrete disease-like symptoms in the absence of pathogens. It is intriguing that a majority of these lesion mimics behave as dominant gain-of-function mutations. The production of lesions is strongly influenced by light, temperature, developmental state and genetic background. Presently, the biological significance of this lesion mimicry is not clear, although suggestions have been made that they may represent defects in the plants’ recognition of, or response to, pathogens. . . . In this paper we argue that this might be the case . . .

Which of the following eight sentences fail to give proper credit to the original authors?

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1. Currently, the biological significance of lesion mimicry in plants is not known, although suggestions have been made that they may represent defects in the plants’ recognition of, or response to, pathogens.
2. Currently, the biological significance of lesion mimicry in plants is not known, although suggestions have been made that they may represent defects in the plants' recognition of, or response to, pathogens (Johal et al. 1995).
3. Currently, "the biological significance of lesion mimicry in plants is not known, although suggestions have been made that they may represent defects in the plants' recognition of, or response to, pathogens" (Johal et al. 1995).
4. The biological significance of lesion mimicry in plants is not currently known, although some researchers believe that they may represent defects in the ability of plants to recognize or respond to pathogens.
5. The biological significance of lesion mimicry in plants is currently not known, although some researchers believe that they may represent defects in the ability of plants to recognize or respond to pathogens (Johal et al. 1995).
6. Lesion mimicry in plants has been proposed to be due to mutations in genes controlling the ability of plants to detect and respond to pathogens.
7. Lesion mimicry in plants has been proposed to be due to mutations in genes controlling the ability of plants to detect and respond to pathogens (Johal et al. 1995).
8. Disease-like lesions in plants may be due to mutations in genes controlling the ability of plants to defend themselves against pathogens (Johal et al. 1995).

Instructor's note: The first sentence is blatant plagiarism in any discipline. Successive sentences become increasingly original, so that the last sentence is acceptable in any discipline. The opinions of students and professors diverge on the acceptability of the sentences in the middle of the list. Approximately half of all students believe sentence number 4, for example, is acceptable whereas 80 percent of professors believe it is plagiarism. This discrepancy demonstrates the need for better communication between students and faculty on this subject.