My PRIMER on PLAGIARISM (please read)
What is Plagiarism and how do we know when we do it?
In the broadest sense, plagiarism occurs whenever an author presents words or ideas as his or her own when, in fact, they were someone else's. More specifically, if you copy someone's paper, you have plagiarized. If you buy, trade for, or steal someone's paper, you have plagiarized.

But there's more to plagiarism than these fairly obvious "stealing/borrowing" examples. Sometimes, we don't think we're really plagiarizing, but in fact we are. For example, say you have been researching for a while now, and you have a pile of note cards with random quotations on them. There is one card with a really good idea, but you're not sure if you copied it from your source or if you came up with the idea yourself.

If you put it in your paper, is it plagiarism?
Well, if it turns out that it did, indeed, come directly from the book, article, or web site that you were working with, then yes, it's plagiarism. If you're not sure, go back and double check. This is why taking thorough, copious notes is a good thing.

But if it was a summary in your own words of what someone else wrote, is it still plagiarism?
Well, technically, yes. If you paraphrase, you must give credit to the author. You need to make sure you have the right citation information; otherwise, someone may come back and accuse you of plagiarism.

Here's another example:
You find a web site with wonderful information, and you highlight what you want, copy, and paste it into your essay. You forget to cite where you got it. Or perhaps you weren't sure how to do it right, so you just left it. Is this plagiarism?
Yes, and it's quite easy for teachers to find. If you found it on the web, more than likely a careful teacher could plug in the "suspect" sentence and find the same article you found. Once again, you must cite your sources. When in doubt, cite.

Must you ALWAYS cite?
Actually, there is one exception to the rule: "Common Knowledge." If the fact or idea you are using is common knowledge, you don't have to have a source for it.

But what is considered common knowledge?
If the idea or fact (a) appears in a general source, like an encyclopedia or dictionary, (b) is repeated by over three different sources, or (c) is claimed to be "common knowledge" by more than one author who is in the field and knowledgeable, it can be considered common knowledge.

Besides not failing or being expelled, is there any other reason why I should care?
One reason is that you have done a great deal of work researching and preparing your paper. You have come up with the ideas, gone to the library or internet, outlined, drafted, and so on. Give yourself some credit. Let your reader know that you have done the work. It adds to your authority and to your creditability. Do it.

What about plagiarizing a paper you are summarizing?
First, you need to make an explicit citation in your first sentence to reference the paper you are summarizing and that you are summarizing it. Then you do not need to cite it further throughout
the summary. It is clear that everything you are writing is the other person’s work. Second, if you keep the information in the same order or just substitute words in sentences that you took from the paper, that is plagiarism. Third, the best way to not plagiarize is to read the paper a couple times and take notes (do not use any words directly from the paper in your notes unless you put them in quotes). Then put the actual paper away and try to explain what you read to your grandmother (we all know you have a smart grandmother). Then finally when you are done and proof reading it, go back and check that you did not plagiarize!

Note that plagiarism is taken very seriously at NIU, especially in 305 and the lab classes.