Why do you need to evaluate sources?

To avoid situations like this:


Iran's news agency portrays satirical Onion story as its own - CNN.com

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(CNN) -- Add Iran's news agency to the long list of those hoodwinked by the satire of The Onion.

Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency published a story Friday claiming that a Gallup poll found that rural white Americans prefer Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over President Barack Obama.

Such a poll would indeed be big news in Iran (and the United States) -- if it were true.

But the source was The Onion, the publication that presents the outlandish as real news.
Begin by asking two questions about any source that you are considering using.

- Question #1: Is this source reliable?
  - Reliability has to do with how credible the source is, and there are different degrees of reliability.

- Question #2: Is this source appropriate?
  - Appropriateness has to do with the purpose in which you will be using the source, considering what type of sources are required for the specific assignment or writing situation.
  - Part of this may be considering just how reliable of a source you need for the type of assignment that you are writing.
1. Who wrote this source?
   - Thinking about who wrote a source allows you to consider how much of an authority the author is on the topic of the source. The logic here is that those who are experts on an issue will be more reliable.
   - So, is the author of this source an expert with an advanced degree (Ph.D., M.D., J.D., etc.) in this field? Does the author have experience in this specific field? Is the author a journalist? Is the author a member of the general public?

2. Who published this source?
   - The type of publication in which the source is found says something about the source, as an article published in an academic journal is generally considered more reliable than an article published in a newspaper.
   - So, what type of source is this? Is this an academic journal? Is this a newspaper? Is this an advocacy group (.org) website? Is this a government publication? Is this an encyclopedia? Is this a blog? Is this an entertainment site? Is this a shopping site?
3. How current is this source?
   - Generally, the more up-to-date a source is the better, since the source will capture the latest discourse on the topic and will be based on the latest research/information.

4. What kind of research is used in this source?
   - Checking out who your source cites is a great way to consider the reliability of the source.
   - Maybe you are reading a newspaper article, but does the journalist authoring the article cite other journalists or does the author cite experts in a specific field?
   - If there are links in a source, follow the links to see what type of sources are cited, then evaluate those sources as well.
5. What kind of bias is in this source?
   
   - All sources will have some sort of bias, but some will have much more or more obvious bias than others.
     
     - This will partly relate to what type of source you are looking at, as sources from an advocacy group found on .org websites will generally be pretty biased, as will newspaper editorials.
     
     - On the other hand, news stories present themselves as objective pieces of writing that only relate the facts of the case. Often these facts will be related in a biased way, though.

   - To uncover bias, ask why the source was written. Was this source written to convince readers? Was it written to inform readers? Was it written to entertain readers? Was it written to sell something? Does this source say its purpose is one of these when really its true purpose is something else?
1. What is the assignment?
   - Sometimes an assignment sheet will state exactly what type of sources are needed. Read the assignment sheet and ask the instructor.

2. Who is the assignment’s audience?
   - Of course it is the instructor, but some assignments will specify that you are writing to a specific type of audience. An essay written to the general public would need sources that meet one degree of reliability, while an essay written to an academic audience would generally need sources with a higher degree of reliability.

3. What are the expectations of this discipline?
   - Some of the reliability criteria will be more or less important depending on the discipline of the specific class.
   - The currency of a source may be much more important in a science class than in some other classes. The same logic could apply to other criteria as well, depending on the expectations of the discipline.
Applying the above ideas, how reliable is this source and would it be appropriate to cite in most essays?