Academic Skills 4
Writing a Critical Review Essay

A critical review essay compares at least two (through usually three or four) books or journal articles to one another in a way that:

- Delineates the essential elements (e.g., objective, main conclusion, and methods/approach) of each text.
- Brings the texts into dialogue with one another.
- Evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of each (in a way that brings the texts into dialogue with one another).
- Offers an original overall argument about the texts.

We'll approach writing such an essay using the following outline:

1. Unique Title

2. Introduction:
    a. Briefly state why the topic of the texts is important.
    b. List the author(s) and title of each text.
    c. Identify the main conclusion of each text.
    d. Briefly present your main argument (i.e., your overall evaluation of the texts).

3. Summary: Offer a concise summary of each text. Focus primarily on the objective(s), method(s)/approach/support, and main conclusions of the text.

4. Synthesis: Bring the texts into dialog with one another. You might do so by:
    a. Comparing and contrasting various elements from each text. For example:
        i. "Texts 1, 2, and 3 all share this important element…" (e.g., assumption, method, finding).
        ii. "While texts 1 and 2 both assume A, text 3 makes a different assumption…"
        iii. "Each text reaches very different conclusions about B."
    b. Discussing the shared implications of the texts. For example:
        i. "Because text 1 finds C, the implication for text 2 is…
    c. Noting their direct reactions to one another. (These are relatively rare but do occur.) For example:
        i. "The author of text 3 strengthens her conclusion by responding to the counterargument presented in text 2…"

5. Evaluation: There are two possible strategies to this. In this course, we are favoring the latter strategy, because it will allow you to show how different analytical approaches (e.g., normative vs. behavioral vs. institutional) fit together within the study of political science topics.
    a. Atomistic evaluation: assess each text separately using overarching assessment criterion
    b. Holistic evaluation: assess whether the texts *together* provide a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Example of atomistic vs. holistic evaluation:
The subject of your review essay is the leading deliberative model of democracy within contemporary political theory. According to this model, political decisions are only legitimate if they are based on *reasonable* deliberation between everyone whom will be affected by the decision. Text 1 lays out and discusses the normative conditions deliberation must meet in order to be considered reasonable, and therefore legitimate. Text 2 empirically evaluates a citizen forum—one set up by local authorities to bring citizens together to discuss the future of their neighborhood. The study analyses whether, and to what extent, the deliberations in this forum meet the criteria of reasonableness.

- *Atomistic evaluation*: Texts 1 and 2 are evaluated separately on the basis of the assessment criterion "internal consistency". The central reasoning in text 1 appears to be internally consistent, but not in text 2. This makes text 1 (in this respect) stronger than text 2.
- *Holistic evaluation:* Text 1 contributes to text 2, because without the normative theory of deliberative democracy developed in text 1, the empirical research done in text 2 is blind. Conversely, without the empirical research carried out in text 2, text 1 remains merely a theoretical exercise without practical relevance or meaning. In short, in this case the whole is more than the sum of the parts. The texts complement each other and offer a better understanding of political reality than they can offer separately.

6. Conclusion: Bring the essay full circle.
    a. Briefly return to the topic's importance.
    b. Emphasize your main argument (largely based on the evaluation in section 3).

7. References