

## Revising an Essay—WWE as Soap Opera

The following material responds to the Practice activity presented on p.366 of *Acting on Words*.

To produce the first draft essay (presented on pp. 368-69 and again below), the student worked through prewriting activities leading to a topic sentence tree and a tentative thesis statement. Your goal for this exercise is to revise the student's first draft with attention to **key locations** and **style**. How can these be more effective? A good way to approach this second-draft exercise is to devise another topic sentence outline, including last sentences for each paragraph in the outline. To design this outline, find and sharpen the apparent thesis sentence in or suggested by the student's first draft. What is the controlling idea? What seems to be lacking in the first draft thesis statement? Try to draw from the first draft the specific elements needed to sharpen and complete a thesis statement. This should then guide your work on the revised second draft essay. Some reorganizing may seem in order so that the essay parts are as emphatic and coherent as they can be.

Following the first-draft essay is our suggested revision, commentary on the revision, and then an annotated copy of the first draft noting further specific areas for development. We also provide questions for further thinking and (immediately below) sections of *Acting on Words* that may assist this revision exercise. If you do not have a copy of *Acting on Words*, the basic topics cited are available from other writing sites and reference texts on composition.

### ***For Further Reading***

The following sections of *Acting on Words* offer guidelines that may help with revision of the following essay.

- Chapter 4 Paragraph Skills: The “4-F” Test
- Chapter 6 Outlining: Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences
- Chapter 7 Introductions and Conclusions
- Chapter 12 Comparison-Contrast (especially two main purposes, p. 177; point-by-point structure, p. 179; and the differences and similarities test, p. 183)
- Chapter 14 Critical Analysis and Evaluation

## Sample Student Essay: The First Draft

World Wrestling Entertainment is really only a kind of soap opera. It is a big soap opera for a mostly male audience. WWE, like all soap operas, is about melodrama because of the exaggerated situations and extreme feelings. Although WWE is different in some ways from regular soap operas, there are lots of similarities.

Both WWE and daytime soap operas present lots of characters in painful, often exaggerated circumstances. The characters in both are always in some trouble, distress, or crisis. In both the wrestling world and the usual soap operas, there seems to be a whole lot of betrayal. The situations are the same over and over: someone lies or cheats on somebody in the daytime soaps and someone sneaks up on someone in the WWE and hits him with a chair. The situations are all pretty extreme, but also almost the same from week to week. It’s all about simple characters with one or two exaggerated characteristics getting in trouble or causing trouble.

Another thing these two types of shows have in common is there’s no overall conclusion or else the show would end as a series. Different problems get concluded, sure, but one thing spins into another and one big problem creates other ones for next week, next month, next year. When someone’s marriage ends in the soaps, it often comes

out that years of adultery are the reason. However, the cheating might be between a sultry corporate businesswoman and her shifty accountant, who would falsify all their expense accounts because he was obsessed with going to fancy spas in a bikini with her, and now the company's stockholders are suddenly demanding an investigation that might also reveal that none of the company's new products meets safety standards. In WWE, a tag-team match turns bad when one of the partners is sucker-punched by a masked wrestler who is not even supposed to be in the ring. He climbs in because one of the other wrestler's brothers—also a wrestler—jumped on him last week from the top turnbuckle minutes before their match was supposed to start. There's lots of indiscriminate pushing in the ring until somebody gets hit with a garbage can while the ref was advising someone else about time restrictions for the bout. This cheap shot wins the match, but the revenge will probably come next week. In both soaps and wrestling, the episodes are cliff-hangers to deliberately set up lots of other related episodes, so the stories are continuous, unlike other television shows that usually resolve each episode before a new one next week.

Despite similarities, there are some important contrasts between the wrestling and daytime soap opera worlds. Soap operas have largely female audiences, while WWE has mostly male audiences. Soap operas usually dramatize family problems and betrayals in friendships and relationships. But wrestling makes fun of physical aggression and bodily pain. The soaps look at emotions in the context of social and private life, while the WWE presents the pain of comic book make-believe physical abuse in male competition. These differences make the melodrama of soap operas seem more realistic, at least as far as their characters' problems relating in some way to the viewers' fears and perhaps hopes. So, while the women's soaps exaggerate and exploit a lot of genuine adult fears, the wrestling really only represents the immature boy's perspective of a schoolyard bullying tournament.

With all these easily identifiable heroes, villains, and victims, the daytime soaps and WWE have a big devoted audience. Unfortunately, the people of these audiences are often ridiculed by people who are not fans. The fans are not necessarily silly, but perhaps are enjoying the simplistic characters in one crisis after another. The formulas please the

viewers. This is because there are occasionally surprising variations in the same plots and themes. This requires real innovation. There are links between differences in the sex of the separate audiences and the differences in the types of fears and fantasies of the two types of melodrama. These differences in content reveal that the men and women who like melodrama seek different types in order to entertain themselves. However, both sexes seem to enjoy seeing emotions represented as spectacles.

## Suggested Revision of First Draft

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is really another soap opera, except one for a mostly male audience. WWE, like all soap operas, relies on melodrama: plot formulas that present exaggerated situations and extreme feelings. Although the WWE is different in significant ways from regular soap operas, similarities of form and audience response reveal that the different audiences seek the same experience in viewing emotional displays.

The audiences are, indeed, different. Soap operas have largely female audiences, while WWE has mostly male audiences. Soap operas usually exploit the fears of family problems and betrayals in friendships and relationships, whereas wrestling parodies physical aggression and bodily pain. So, while the soaps dramatize the pain of emotions in social and private life, the WWE presents comic-book violence as male competition. These differences make the melodrama of soap operas seem more realistic than that of the WWE, at least as far as characters' problems and resolutions reflecting the viewers' fears and hopes. Significantly, the "women's" soaps exaggerate and exploit genuine adult fears, errors and consequences, while the wrestling really represents only a sadistic boy's perspective of a schoolyard bullying tournament. Not surprisingly, the women and men who like melodrama seek different fears and assurances to entertain themselves, and therefore important contrasts characterize wrestling and daytime soap opera melodramas.

These differences notwithstanding, both WWE and daytime soap operas present simplistic characters in painful, exaggerated, though predictably formulaic circumstances.

These characters are always in some distress or crisis, usually resulting from a betrayal. The situations are the same over and over: someone lies or cheats on someone in the daytime soaps and someone sneaks up on someone in the WWE and hits him with a chair. Although the situations are all extreme, their repetition from week to week makes exaggeration a standard. Since both types of shows offer crisis as routine, viewers must enjoy watching predictable emotional flare-ups.

Both types of shows also depend on delaying any overall conclusion or else the show would end as a series. Different individual problems conclude, but one ordeal spins into another, creating other ones for next week, next month, next year. When someone's marriage ends in the soaps, for example, years of adultery often are the reason. However, the cheating might also be between a sultry corporate businesswoman and the company accountant, who has falsified all the expense accounts because he was obsessed with visiting fancy spas with her, and now the company's stockholders are suddenly demanding an investigation that might also reveal that none of the company's new products meets safety standards. By comparison, in WWE, a tag-team match turns bad when one partner is sucker-punched by a masked wrestler who is not supposed to be in the ring. He climbs in because one of the other wrestler's brothers—also a wrestler—jumped on him last week from the top turnbuckle minutes before their match was to start. Copious amounts of indiscriminate pushing in the ring results in somebody are being hit with a garbage can while the ref advises someone else about time restrictions for the bout. This cheap shot wins the match, but the revenge will probably come next week. In both soaps and wrestling, the episodes are cliff-hangers to set up other related episodes, so the stories are continuous, unlike other television stories that usually resolve each episode before a new one next week. Viewers, evidently, desire not only predictable emotional flare-ups, but a predictability of such scale that the program never really ends.

The easily identifiable heroes, villains, and victims, of both the daytime soaps and WWE, have large and devoted audiences. While these audiences are often ridiculed by people who are not fans, surely the numerous fans represent a deep-seated and common emotional urge. Their enjoyment of simplistic characters working their way through one crisis after another demonstrates an undeniable appeal. Adding to this

appeal may be the periodic elements of surprise, which innovative writers somehow manage to bring to the formulaic episodes. But it's hard not to think that the heart of the appeal is something raw and basic. Despite differences, both audiences, both sexes, seem equally to crave, if not enjoy, the basis of all melodrama: personally relevant emotions represented as extravagant spectacles. Whether this craving—as some critics suggest—leads to addiction, the “artwork” thus reversing art's usual function of liberator and healer, suggests a path of further reflection.

## Commentary

Following this commentary is the first draft essay with footnoted comments on promising content and areas for improvements. We now summarize main points of the revisions we have made.

In the second draft, we have revised to sharpen the thesis statement; the essay organization, in keeping with the more specific thesis; and the topic sentences, in keeping with the revised thesis statement and essay organization. Grammar and punctuation have been polished in places (for instance, the first draft sometimes omits commas before coordinating conjunctions), but these were not the primary concerns in this particular editing. We have, however, paid particular attention to revise for conciseness and compression (two sentences becoming one), active verb choice, and specific diction for greater clarity of points. We have sought to impart a consistent, appropriate tone throughout.

In reference to the three steps of revision presented on p. 355 of *Acting on Words*, our main attention was to the first step of *sharpening key locations* to clarify and complete analytical intentions and the third step of *improving style* to drive points home.

The term **key locations** refers to the introduction and thesis statement; basic organization in keeping with the thesis statement; topic sentences and paragraph conclusions; and concluding paragraph.

The first draft uses the brisk “head-on account” style of opening described in *Acting on Words* on p. 98. “Crisp declarative sentences ... establish the topic [WWE as soap opera] and narrow to the thesis statement.” This brisk approach, especially for a short essay of analysis, seems efficient and raises no particular problems.

We have strengthened the *thesis statement*, however, by adding an *implication* to the vague first draft observation that there are similarities between WWE and soap operas. The revised thesis now articulates *a point about that similarity*—that the different audiences seek the same basic experience. This point functions as the *controlling idea* of the essay. The word “form” in the second-draft thesis statement encompasses simplistic characters, exaggerated conflict, and endless repetition—features of form. A direct-list thesis statement might name these, but here the one word “form” suffices to anticipate these specific aspects. Similarly, the words “audience response” encompass the points about large numbers of fans and fan devotion. As described on pp.87-88 of *Acting on Words*, the terms “form” and “audience response” provide *general* signals of the more specific reasons to follow under paragraph topic sentences. Another important feature of the revised thesis statement in the second draft is that the word “because” is now implied, thus specifying the importance of the reasons given in support of the controlling idea. We might reword the second-draft thesis statement as follows:

Evidently male and female audiences equally seek a basic emotional experience in WWE and soap opera *because* both forms present simplistic characters, exaggerated conflict, and endless repetition, and both forms draw large numbers of devoted fans.

The word “because” connects the controlling idea (WWE and soaps both appeal to a *primal emotional experience*) to its supporting reasons (we can infer this primal appeal from the similar elements of form and from the legions of devoted fans). As we review the first draft, it becomes clear that the claims stated in the above thesis statement after the word “because” are the reasons provided in support of the controlling idea that fans of WWE and soap opera crave the same basic emotional experience. But the connections between the reasons (scattered somewhat abruptly and haphazardly in various places) and

the controlling idea (too mildly stated) need to be sharpened. Revising the thesis statement to a new state of completeness and specificity identifies the ideal structure or organization for the rest of the essay. A basic outline now resembles the following:

- Thesis statement
- Both forms present simplistic characters involved in exaggerated conflicts
- Both forms go on “endlessly”
- Both forms draw large numbers of devoted fans

But the first draft leaves something else to consider if the outline is to be properly refined. The first draft recognizes that ignoring differences between WWE and soap opera would be overly simplistic. Somewhere in the essay organization, this concession needs to be included. The first draft has incorporated this concession into its tentative thesis statement, subordinating the differences with the word “although.” This seems like a good basic approach, one that signals at the most important point in the essay a recognition of balance and complexity. The sentence addresses differences first, while subordinating them: the principle of parallel structure therefore suggests that the body of the essay, in a matching pattern, should deal with the differences before moving to the similarities stressed in the main and most forceful clause of the thesis sentence.

Following this organization also allows the principle of climactic order to function: points discussed earlier in the paper will not carry the same force as points that follow. Since the similarities are what the writer wishes to stress, placing them after the differences seems like a good strategy. While the first draft uses the organizational methods of classification and definition, its tentative thesis statement shows a predominant commitment to comparison-contrast. Settling on that form as governing focus and structure helps with refining the entire essay. The above basic outline can now be refined as follows:



- Thesis statement
- Acknowledge/summarize differences
- Both forms present simplistic characters involved in exaggerated conflicts
- Both forms go on “endlessly”
- Both forms draw large numbers of devoted fans

This refined outline suggests five paragraphs, a standard essay structure and length for many first-year courses. The reviser can now work on sharpening an effective topic sentence as well as an effective concluding sentence for each paragraph. Perfecting these sentences helps to draw out and emphasize the significance of the observations in the analysis. At this stage, the writer might design another topic sentence tree, but with the paragraphs now structured in final order. This outline/diagram allows the writer to experiment with ways of phrasing the topic sentences to shape the idea of each paragraph as well as link it to what precedes. In this outline/diagram, the writer can explore wording of paragraph concluding sentences, making sure that they affirm and deepen the main interpretation of the paragraph and do not simply state a fact or repeat what has already been said.

Drawing on step three of revising (perfecting style), we have revised the topic sentences with pointed language to make their assertions more emphatic, punchier. In the topic sentence of the fourth paragraph, for instance, we have revised for the stronger phrasing of “depend on delaying any overall conclusion” in place of “have in common is there’s no overall conclusion.” “Depend” and “delaying” are more active and more specific word choices than “have” and “is,” which describe states of being only, not actions.

An important revision strategy (connected to key locations as well as concise and specific style) is to close paragraphs strongly, especially in analytical writing. The paragraph develops a point, its own controlling idea, so it is valuable to articulate the implication of that point in the paragraph’s last sentence or two. In our revised draft’s third paragraph

(paragraph two in the first draft), for example, we eliminate the last sentence from the original draft because the sentence only repeats an earlier point without adding any new observation or analytical significance. In its place, we close the paragraph by adding a sentence that asserts an implication about both WWE's and conventional soap opera's reliance on crisis as a routine plot device. Importantly, this last sentence in our third paragraph is also directly linked to that paragraph's topic sentence, to the claim that both types of shows specialize in painful yet formulaic circumstances.

We have made revisions in our second draft's conclusion so that it is now directly linked to the thesis statement and to the topic sentences. The type of conclusion that seemed to suit the purpose and tone of this essay is the one discussed on p. 104 of *Acting on Words*: the suggestive conclusion. This approach does not revisit past ground. Our revised conclusion, in fact, simply concludes discussion of the third reason why WWE resembles soaps—the equally large and devoted audiences for both. This point seems the strongest or at least deciding reason in support of a common basis between the two shows and naturally leads to a reinforcement of the controlling idea of the essay and final thoughts on its possible implications. If you are concise and specific, you can often add two or so sentences of essay conclusion to the end of your last body paragraph. The final reason discussed in your analysis/argument should be your strongest one, so why mute its resonance with a lengthy repetitious conclusion. Once you have asserted your final reason (in this case, numerous devoted fans), conclude as briskly as you can, so that your final point will continue to resound. The power of your argument itself rather than rhetorical dressing to follow is what persuades your readers.

Whether or not you agree with points made in the sample essay used for this exercise is less important than the essayist's efforts to develop a thesis broken down into paragraphs with specific points that, taken together, cohere as a stance, as one position.

## Sample Student Essay First Draft

### With Editing Questions and Suggestions

World Wrestling Entertainment is really only a kind of soap opera. It is a big soap opera for a mostly male audience. WWE, like all soap operas, is about melodrama because of the exaggerated situations and extreme feelings.<sup>1</sup> Although WWE is different in some ways from regular soap operas, there are lots<sup>2</sup> of similarities.<sup>3</sup>

Both WWE and daytime soap operas present lots of characters in painful, often exaggerated circumstances.<sup>4</sup> The characters in both are always in some trouble, distress, or crisis. In both the wrestling world and the usual soap operas, there seems to be a whole lot of betrayal.<sup>5</sup> The situations are the same over and over: someone lies or cheats on somebody in the daytime soaps and someone sneaks up on someone in the WWE and hits him with a chair. The situations are all pretty extreme, but also almost the same from week to week. It's all about simple characters with one or two exaggerated characteristics getting in trouble or causing trouble.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This sentence could possibly serve as a thesis statement in an essay of critical definition, in this case, an essay defining an essential of melodrama. As we will discover, this essay essentially is concerned with a definition of WWE as melodrama, but because the comparison to soaps as an instrument of definition becomes ongoing, the essay seems really most interested in what common features draw fans to both forms. As we discover, more than the exaggerated situations and extreme feelings draw the fans. Therefore this sentence on its own sketches in important information about the topic but is not sufficient to become the thesis.

<sup>2</sup> “Lots” is overly casual or informal language for a university essay of analysis.

<sup>3</sup> The writer presents a vague controlling idea, with the word “lots” signaling a significant degree of common ground. But the nature of this similarity should be characterized, and to complete a good thesis statement, the reasons for this attitude should be at least suggested if not specifically enumerated.

<sup>4</sup> The idea here seems like good topic sentence material. It makes a strong assertion about the two forms.

<sup>5</sup> The point being made is good, but the style (“a whole lot of betrayal”) is informal. University analyses assume an audience of readers operating at more formal levels of discussion.

<sup>6</sup> A good test for all concluding sentences is to ask whether they state a fact or an assertion, an interpretation. If not, then they are not playing the role of a paragraph conclusion. This sentence states a characteristic that few would dispute: a study of soaps and WWE shows surely proves the point. What is needed is a statement of why this is significant—how does it further the controlling idea of the essay?

Another thing these two types of shows have in common is there's<sup>7</sup> no overall conclusion or else the show would end as a series.<sup>8</sup> Different problems get concluded, sure, but one thing spins into another and one big problem creates other ones for next week, next month, next year. When someone's marriage ends in the soaps, it often comes out that years of adultery are the reason. However, the cheating might be between a sultry corporate businesswoman and her shifty accountant, who would falsify all their expense accounts because he was obsessed with going to fancy spas in a bikini with her, and now the company's stockholders are suddenly demanding an investigation that might also reveal that none of the company's new products meets safety standards. In WWE, a tag-team match turns bad when one of the partners is sucker-punched by a masked wrestler who is not even supposed to be in the ring. He climbs in because one of the other wrestler's brothers—also a wrestler—jumped on him last week from the top turnbuckle minutes before their match was supposed to start. There's lots of indiscriminate pushing in the ring until somebody gets hit with a garbage can while the ref was advising someone else about time restrictions for the bout. This cheap shot wins the match, but the revenge will probably come next week. In both soaps and wrestling, the episodes are cliff-hangers to deliberately set up lots of other related episodes, so the stories are continuous, unlike other television shows that usually resolve each episode before a new one next week.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Contractions (“there’s” rather than the fully spelled “there is”) suit a more informal level of writing than that typical of university analysis. In addition, the student has used the wordy “dummy subject” construction (there are... it was...). This construction is discussed in “Preparing to Solve the 15 Common Errors” at this website, Handbook, and can be found in any standard style or grammar reference. Removing such constructions and finding more active verbs will increase stylistic effectiveness. The writer, for example, could simply say, “

<sup>8</sup> This also seems like a potentially promising topic sentence, since it identifies a characteristic that seems related to fan appeal. This topic sentence seems to add to the previous point about large problems (so large, presumably, that they never end—there is an inherent logic here, a connection to the previous topic sentence).

<sup>9</sup> The final sentence could do more to state significance. This merely repeats the opening observation that these forms never end. How does that further the controlling idea of the essay?

Despite similarities, there are some important contrasts<sup>10</sup> between the wrestling and daytime soap opera worlds. Soap operas have largely female audiences, while WWE has mostly male audiences. Soap operas usually dramatize family problems and betrayals in friendships and relationships. But wrestling makes fun of physical aggression and bodily pain. The soaps look at emotions in the context of social and private life, while the WWE presents the pain of comic book make-believe physical abuse in male competition. These differences make the melodrama of soap operas seem more realistic, at least as far as their characters' problems relating in some way to the viewers' fears and perhaps hopes. So, while the women's soaps exaggerate and exploit a lot of genuine adult fears, the wrestling really only represents the immature boy's perspective of a schoolyard bullying tournament.<sup>11</sup>

With all these easily identifiable heroes, villains, and victims, the daytime soaps and WWE have a big devoted audience.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately,<sup>13</sup> the people of these audiences are often ridiculed by people who are not fans. The fans are not necessarily silly, but perhaps are enjoying the simplistic characters in one crisis after another. The formulas please the viewers. This is because there are occasionally surprising variations in the same plots and themes. This requires real innovation. There are links between differences in the sex of the separate audiences and the differences in the types of fears and fantasies of the two types of melodrama.<sup>14</sup> These differences in content reveal that the men and

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<sup>10</sup> Placing this concession here, toward the end, runs the risk of suggesting that it is somehow more important than the points made up to here, or that it qualifies them in a particularly important way.

<sup>11</sup> Without a more clear integration and subordination, this paragraph could seem to be asserting a different essay with a different controlling idea.

<sup>12</sup> This important point—returning, it seems, to the controlling idea of similarity, does not clearly or coherently flow from the previous paragraph.

<sup>13</sup> The opinion expressed in this word raises the question why is this unfortunate? Assertions need to be explained. This essay does not really deal with this assertion, but if it did, wouldn't it risk wandering off topic?

<sup>14</sup> This statement does not seem to flow from the previous one.

women who like melodrama seek different types in order to entertain themselves.<sup>15</sup>  
However, both sexes seem to enjoy seeing emotions represented as spectacles.<sup>16</sup>

### ***For Further Thinking***

1. Read Lee Jennings critique of “The Right Stuff” on p. 218 of *Acting on Words*. Then see the Practice activity suggested on p. 221. It asks you to imagine Jennings essay expanded by research. What sorts of examples and specific details might be used to strengthen the first draft? For an example of how Jennings’ essay could be expanded with research, see the text website, Chapter 16. With that comparison in mind, return to this revised draft essay on WWE. Are there sections that seem to need support, that fail to back up assertions with specifics? What sorts of research sources and examples could be used to strengthen various parts of this essay? What sorts of statistical comparison might help to ground and test this discussion?
2. What further points in this revised essay still seem to invite further clarification and exploration? For instance, is it entirely explained why the ongoing nature of WWE and soaps differs from that of a series?
3. In the first draft essay, identify several phrases or sentences that appear wordy and perhaps vague. Suggest alternative wording that is more concise and specific.

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<sup>15</sup> This assertion in this prominent location seems to suggest that the essay has been ultimately arguing differences.

<sup>16</sup> Stating the opposite view here could create a feeling of a flip-flop. At this point, the essay should be decisively committed to one main focus and its implications. Furthermore, this final sentence rather mildly repeats what appears to be the intended controlling idea of the essay. This sentence does not drive home that idea and/or signal its implications.