

# Segue

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Writing  Writing

## WRITING WITH SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

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“I wish that every human life might be  
pure transparent freedom”

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*

**S**imone de Beauvoir, an existentialist and optimist—her very name meaning beautiful seeing—considers the idea that the individual must find her way through the many ways of being in this life through an exercise or denial of her freedom of choice. These statements reflect de Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity, as well as her relentless hope for the human condition.

Ambiguity in life results from the tension of living in the present, all the while knowing the future will end in nothing but death. With the complications of ambiguity come responsibility for making choices in situations where facts may be interpreted in more than one way. Nevertheless, the individual is not excused from making choices. Exploration of these choices among the conflicts inherent in the double and contradictory meanings of events in the presence of life and death is the basis of art in fiction, drama and poetry. De Beauvoir not only writes about these conflicts abstractly in her books and essays on philosophy, but she also gives concrete life to these conflicts through her literary works in the forms of fiction and drama. Her novels, *She Came to Stay* and *A Very Easy Death*, fictional accounts of her life, examine the situations and the characters through the lens of existentialism.

De Beauvoir, born in 1908 in Paris, France, grew up and lived most of her life in the fourteenth arrondissement of Paris. Her mother, a devout Catholic, and her father, an agnostic, encouraging an independent mind, allowed Simone de Beauvoir to make important life decisions for herself. By age fifteen, she had abandoned faith in the Catholic religion and begun her association with some of France's best writers. In 1929 de Beauvoir met Jean-Paul Sartre at a study group at the

Sorbonne. They were together for 51 years until his death. They spent their days apart from each other writing and came together in the evenings to read and discuss their ideas.

Along with writing *The Second Sex*, one of the first major feminist texts, Simone de Beauvoir plays a major role in French intellectual life from the 1940s to her death in the 1980s. As an existentialist, she believes in the importance of choice for creating the self within society. In her concern for women living in a male-dominated society, Simone de Beauvoir claims that women must take responsibility for their own lives. For her and other existentialists, including her lifelong companion Sartre, meaning for life comes through conscious consideration of one's own existence. With the freedom to live authentically, the self, through recognition of one's individuality as well as one's alienation from the whole, can become aware of and might perhaps more fully live within the rich and complex world.

Through Simone de Beauvoir's work, we see that writing and thinking in philosophical terms need not always take the form of exposition or theory making. Rather, philosophical thought can take the shape of fiction or poetry or drama, where the writer applies her philosophy to the elements of reality within the literary form. The writing of philosophy through the medium of fiction or drama is perhaps most appropriate and effective as, according to existential theory, abstractions can never stand for the reality of human existence.

For writers it is imperative at some point in the process of writing, preferably in the beginning stages, that they have knowledge of purpose and understanding of the intent of their writing. Writers, aware of the philosophy that defines their understanding of life, are able to define authentic premises on which to build the characters and conflicts and resolutions of their fiction. The combination of a sound and logical premise and an author's strong conviction makes for writing of power and literary value.

The premise on which Simone de Beauvoir bases her novel, *A Very Easy Death*, is the idea that to concentrate on the act of living in the present will result in a full life until death. This premise, along with the conviction that knowledge of death leads to meaning in life, results in a novella that makes a simple but powerful statement about death and its effect on loved ones. For de Beauvoir, the meanings found in life, though often small, sustain us in face of the fact that all life is mortal and so gives extra import to the days one has yet to live. De Beauvoir, holding firmly with her premise, finds and allows herself, in *A Very Easy Death*, to express great sorrow at the passing of her mother from a life full of small meanings and then a realization of a fuller appreciation of the days left and to impress on de Beauvoir herself the preciousness of the prize of being able to continue making choices for the rest of her own days.

## Writing Application One

Conscious of the convictions by which you live, create a list of premises. If you wish, use the following formula:

$$\text{choice} + \text{motivating force} = \text{purpose}$$

Put another— perhaps more literary—way, the formula might read:

character + tension of ambiguity = meaning

Using the above formula, by filling in each of the three parts (character choice + action within complex and complicated world = new insight) as one wishes, be it predictable and clichéd or new and perhaps absurd can be a means for beginning a writing inquiry, be it fiction or non-fiction. A list of premises that might lead to consideration of new and/or reconsideration of old ideas and conditions might be:

- cruelty toward the puppy builds in a faithful dog
- greed for material goods buries an unsatisfied life
- blind adherence to one truth frames a boring life
- belief in competition kicks in self development
- complicity rolls into loss of freedom
- meticulousness breeds failure

The less predictable the premise, the more interesting the story line. Though premises may seem preposterous to others, they are valid so long as the writer can illuminate them through the characters, actions, conflicts and resolutions in their stories and plays.

An author brings the premise alive by taking a side to either prove or disprove it. The author should, however, never mention the premise in the story; rather she should show the premise through dialogue and action, inquiry and what ifs.



“I feel the need to perceive the broad implications  
of whatever condition is my own.  
As a woman I managed to explain the feminine condition.  
As I approached old age, I wished to understand  
what it means to be old”

—Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse*

In Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*, death changes the indifference and complacency of the day-to-day into precious moments and sorrow at their passing. As de Beauvoir observes her mother's life struggle and ultimate death in 1963, she recalls the small meanings from the time that was, which, much to her surprise, result in feelings of sorrow at the loss, though the two—mother and daughter—have been more or less estranged for thirty years. De Beauvoir has, through the use of premise, i.e., death of mother brings about a more meaningful life for daughter, found a means of translating the details of her autobiography into meaning and the beauty of discovery.

Autobiography, beyond detailing and giving personal meaning to the writer's life, can present a portrait of life in a universal sense. Not only do Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographical works present her personal life, but they also present a view into the French intellectual life from the 1930s through

the 1970s. But that isn't all. In reading *A Very Easy Death*, in the 1990s in a different country, in the state of Texas, an environment wholly unlike that of de Beauvoir's Paris of the 1960s, I am able to find understanding that helps me deal with the suffering and coming death of my own mother. Through reading, I become de Beauvoir, and my mother becomes her mother. The experience is moving and authentic.

Of particular interest to de Beauvoir are the conditions of old age and death as she writes *The Blood of Others*, *A Very Easy Death*, *She Came to Stay*, *The Force of Circumstance*, and other novels and autobiographies. De Beauvoir does not achieve her connection with reader through absolute faithfulness to what might be labeled the true reality of experience. Rather the details of her autobiographical experiences become merely the material with which she works in service of the greater truth, that of inquiry. Recognizing in herself the natural instinct to place the self in the realm of good while placing others in the realm of bad, de Beauvoir struggles to see her experience in relation to the more realistic whole. It is in this struggle that writing approaches Art.

In *The Prime of Life*, de Beauvoir writes of being surrounded by “people who were odious, ridiculous, or amusing, and who did not have eyes with which to observe [her]. [She] alone had the gift of sight” (145). To counter this myopic attitude, sure to result in didactic and flat autobiography, de Beauvoir complicates her memories with fiction. In an effort to find a subject about which to write, de Beauvoir adds to the details of her serene and protected bourgeois life the misfortunes inherent in the human condition. In order to do this with authenticity, she draws on her sense of indignation at the plight of those less fortunate than herself.

Within the genre of fiction, de Beauvoir manipulates details from her personal biography to include and/or acknowledge poverty and oppression and fear. De Beauvoir comes to acknowledge the existence of other people as they live within the same realm of ambiguity as she. While creating, from autobiography, fiction of universal value, de Beauvoir enriches and complicates her life with perspective and understanding of those beyond her experience.

## Writing Application Two

Recall an anecdote from your past, jot it down, and then consider the event in relation to what took place locally, nationally and internationally. (To do this with the necessary specific details, you need a copy of a newspaper published on the day that you think the anecdote occurred.)

Rewrite the anecdote incorporating a new character created as the opposite of who you think you were at the time of the recalled memory. Complicate the story by using your imagination to create an interesting relationship between newspaper details and your anecdote. Lie, exaggerate, elaborate. Place your writing in service of the developing story, and allow yourself to be *unfaithful* to the precise and precious details of your memory.

Beyond the documented facts of reality, fictionalized and enriched autobiography most accurately validates life, in that the characters struggle through conflicts, complicated and made real through the inclusion of outside perspectives and possibilities. While autobiography may seem to be simply a matter of memory recall, an authentic transformation from memory to story demands not

only varied views of the self and experience, but also the ability to stretch, dramatize, and alter events to fit the truth on the page, fit the personalities and agendas of characters operating within the premise of the fiction.

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“Literature appears when something in life  
goes out of whack”

—Simone de Beauvoir from *La Force de l'âge*

Simone de Beauvoir considers existentialism an optimistic view of the human condition and thus thinks that people are neither naturally good nor naturally bad. Being neither, it is the individual's responsibility to make him or herself good or bad according to the freedom assumed or denied. The choices are difficult because of the confrontation with two truths simultaneously, “the joy of living and the horror of having it end” (*La Force de l'âge* 239).

The distance between the joy and the horror is the rule of ambiguity and the source of tension and conflict in our lives and in our literature. Never relieved from the responsibility of making choices in an absurd world where human existence is unexplainable, humans are yet also bound to the consequences of their decisions and acts. As such the individual often finds the world hostile and permeated with the unstable and inexact state of ambiguity. Perhaps the art of dialectics has come to us from the ancient Greeks in response to this alienation in an indifferent world. Socrates in his *Dialogues* as written by Plato displays the art of approaching a truth through a process of stating a proposition or thesis, contradicting this proposition with an antithesis, and resolving the contradiction by combining the original proposition and the contradiction to formulate a new proposition or synthesis. Hegel calls this process the basis of all motion and development. Our lives are an on-going dialectical process, process of motion and change. Literature, which represents segments of our lives, is written in the structure of the dialectic: character/situation/thesis moving to conflict/antithesis moving to resolution/meaning/synthesis. This too is the structure of the premise which gives the author temporary stability from which to depart on an exploration of the human condition.

Accepting the truth that change is the essence of existence, writers enter the unknown of their fiction for the purpose of coming to new understanding. This understanding is temporary, but is at the same time a source of enrichment for what life remains. Simone de Beauvoir, realizing the absurdity of life and accepting it, devotes her life to establishing communication with others. This too is a form of the dialectic. The writer existing in her time presents a thesis through fiction or drama or essay; the reader existing later brings to the reading of this literature an antithesis, and leaves the reading of the writer's work with a synthesis, which continues to exist for an indefinite time in the future.

## Writing Application Three

Write a dialogue, a conversational exchange, between three persons, where character #1 presents what might be called a thesis, the other two characters present what could be called two different antitheses, and character #1 responds and resolves the scene with a synthesis that propels all three into the next segment of their on-going lives.

Simone de Beauvoir writes in *All Said and Done*, “I wished to make myself exist for other people by communicating to them, in the most direct way, the flavor of my own life . . . I have made adamant enemies, but I have also made many friends among my readers. That is all I wanted” (513). Simone de Beauvoir, in her writings of philosophy and autobiographical fiction, is thesis, is antithesis, is synthesis, is the process of the dialectic, is ambiguity itself, the ambiguity of life between the joy and horror of its end. She is an element of ambiguity both at the time of her life and at this moment in our on-going existence.

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Sandra Gail Teichmann’s books include *Slow Mud*, *Killing Daddy*, and *Woman of the Plains*. She is also a playwright with *Mockernut Street*, *Corinne*, and *Not Laughing* recently staged. When not thinking and writing, she’s painting or playing the classical guitar or teaching at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas where she is a professor of literature, theory, and creative writing.

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