



Seeger Notes #2: SIDEWAYS

Screenplay by Alexander Payne & Jim Taylor

Based on the novel by Rex Pickett

Directed by Alexander Payne

Academy Award, Best Adapted Screenplay

I chose *Sideways* as one of the first films in this series for many reasons. It's a fairly simple film—and if you're a new writer, it's a good idea to start fairly simply. *Sideways* is a good model, because it has a limited number of locations, and a limited number of characters. The story is contemporary, which is almost always cheaper to shoot than a period piece. The story itself is quite universal—two friends go off on a little vacation before one of them gets married. It has a good solid structure. The roles are strong enough to attract well-known, or almost well-known actors. It offers an opportunity for good visuals, as the Santa Ynez Valley in central California is a pretty location.

If you're a professional writer already, you know that even the simplest story can be challenging. This film may give you ideas: about how to keep the conflict going, about using metaphors, about specificity of language in dialogue, and about ways to use a location.

The research I did when I first wrote about this film was much fun. I interviewed the novelist, Rex Pickett, and the writers, Jim Taylor and Alexander Payne (who also directed). I went to the Santa Ynez Valley and stayed at the same hotel, in the same room, that was used in the film. I decided it was essential to my research that I visit all the wineries and taste the various wines, so I took my friend Mara Purl with me as the designated driver. No, I never ended up being three sheets to the wind, or sideways, but I believe I did get a little silly at moments.

Enjoy the film. Perhaps pour yourself a glass of pinot noir before you hit Play.

The Power of Simplicity

Every once in a while, a film comes out that changes the way we think, or act, or react to the world around us. It opens up our perceptions, and ushers us into new worlds that we would ordinarily never inhabit.

In *Sideways*, the simplest of stories—two guys who are best friends go to the California wine country to drink some wine—becomes a rich narrative where a wedding is in jeopardy, love and sex can be threatening and wonderful, and transformation is possible, although not always probable.

Sideways introduced us to the world of wine, and taught us how to swirl it, smell it, taste it, and, perhaps, even drink too much of it. It led to a spike in sales of pinot noir, and a drop in sales of cabernet sauvignon as buyers learned cabernet was prosaic. Thousands of tourists descended on the small towns that make up the Santa Ynez Valley, creating a new industry as they visited the locations from the film, drove drunk on the back roads, and, in some unfortunate cases where reality follows a bit too close to a film, went to the Fess Parker winery to re-enact the scene where Miles overturns the spit bucket.

Perhaps others imbibed as we did while watching the Academy Awards of 2005, drinking pinot noir and giving a special toast to *Sideways* as it won the Oscar for Best Screenplay Adaptation. This character-driven film with less than heroic characters taught us something about wines and getting on with life. It showed that a small film with a low budget (\$16 million), no stars, no special effects, no explosions, and only one car crash (and a minor one at that), could be recognized and awarded and embraced.

The Road Movie

Sideways is a variation of what is often called the road movie, or the journey story, or the trek film. In road movies, characters travel from place to place, either to get away (*Thelma and Louise* or *Leaving Normal*), to go on a vacation (*National Lampoon's Vacation*) or to achieve an important goal at the end of the trip (*The African*

Queen). The journey is almost always transformational. But road movies intrinsically have a problem—they easily become episodic in the absence of a strongly focused narrative line.

Almost all journey stories are character-driven. Yet, while focusing on character, the writers have to keep the journey active with strong plot elements. As in most films, these plot elements include conflict, tension, action, a strong story structure, character dimensionality, and theme.

When journey films work well (*The African Queen* and *Thelma and Louise*), they give the characters time to find out about themselves as they interact with events that are outside the normal course of living.

In *Sideways*, the two friends don't travel far—from winery to winery—but the basic storyline is a simpler variation on the same idea of getting away. Miles has a reason to propose this wine tour to Jack—he wants to introduce Jack to one of his favorite places, to drink some good wine, eat some good food, and spend time with his friend before Jack becomes a married man. Jack has a reason to go—his wedding is on Saturday, and these are the last days he can enjoy his bachelor freedom. The basic storyline suggests a rather boring film with episodes of the two friends driving, eating, drinking, and sleeping. In the hands of lesser writers, this might have been how the film turned out.

Establishing the Timeline

Most journey stories take place over a short period of time, because a shorter timeline increases the drama. Short timelines apply pressure on the characters to get something done quickly. The timeline acts as a pressure cooker, or incubator, where the combustion can lead to a boiling point that forces change. It presents an urgency and sometimes an absolute need—the character must stay in the pressure cooker until some new human understanding or realization or behavior has occurred. Usually the timeline is a ticking clock.

Sideways sets up a timeline of a week. Miles and Jack leave for the wine country on

Saturday, return home for the rehearsal dinner on the following Friday (an off-screen scene), and show up for the wedding the next day. Some period of time passes during the resolution, giving Maya enough time to read Miles's novel, to think about him, and then to contact him and suggest he stop by next time he's in the area.

Establishing the Goal

Every great story has to have direction, sometimes called the Goal, the Objective, or the Intention. How does a writer establish a goal when the motivation on which the story is based is simply the desire to get away for a few days? Right at the beginning, *Sideways* creates a variation on the use of the goal in journey films by clarifying the end of the film—Jack is going to get married on Saturday. Usually the reason for the journey is so that the main character or characters can achieve the goal. But here, Jack and Miles are not going to the wine country in order to get home for the wedding. The wedding is simply the end point of their journey. Events on the journey don't have any intrinsic connection to the goal. In fact, most of what Miles and Jack intend to do while wine-tasting is totally unrelated to the goal. But if the action and the goal are not connected, a story degenerates into a series of arbitrary events, rather than integrated scenes that relate, in one way or another, to the story's end.

The writers had a challenge: how to connect the events in the story to a goal that seems, at first glance, to have little to do with their trip. How did they resolve this? At the First Turning Point, Jack's goal of getting to the church on time and marrying Christine is in jeopardy. Jack makes an announcement that doesn't bode well for his wedding day: he intends to get laid before embarking on an appropriately monogamous marital relationship. Miles knows that Jack could be sacrificing his wedding and his future happiness with his crazy behavior. Miles then clarifies his own goal—to make sure Jack gets married and gets to the church on time. At the Second Turning Point, when the wedding is again in jeopardy, the wedding becomes Jack's goal as well. What began as an ordinary little trip becomes drama because of conflicting goals which rise to the surface by the end of Act One.

Creating Conflict through the Clash of Intentions

Sideways doesn't begin with conflict—it begins with two guys going off to have a good time. Since Miles and Jack have been friends for years and know each other's flaws, we might expect that they each will just accept what the other is doing and live and let live. But this wouldn't create drama. Drama occurs when one character doesn't let the other character do what he or she desires. Conflict occurs because of contradictory intentions.

Miles's intention begins the story. At first, it's general: "I'm really glad we're finally getting this time together . . . I've been begging to take you on the wine tour" (p. 8). Then it becomes more specific: to have some laid-back friendship time, go wine-tasting, eat good food, and simply be together. Nothing more than that. Miles presumes that Jack has the same intention. But he doesn't. At this point Jack's goal for himself (to get laid) is still a secret, but he also has a goal for Miles, which he announces to him: "I'm going to get you laid this week. That's going to be my best man gift to you" (p. 21). For Jack, sex is better than wine. Jack's intention is the story's catalyst, setting up the events that will flow out of this intention. As the story proceeds, complications pile up because of the different expectations and goals. This clash of intentions is the engine that drives the story and escalates the conflict.

In Act One, Jack sees Maya and believes he has found a way to achieve his goal for Miles. Miles immediately negates this idea. Maya is nice, but she's married, and Miles has too much respect for marriage, and for Maya, to pursue this.

That doesn't stop Jack. Drama is created by strong intentions and strong-willed characters. The story continues to get complicated at each structural point. At the First Turning Point, Jack announces his own intention—not only to make sure Miles get laid, but to get some good sex for himself to celebrate his last week of freedom. Neither of these intentions sit well with Miles. He realizes there won't be as much friendly togetherness as he had hoped for, which means his expectations for the week will be dashed. He also knows it's not a good thing to sleep with someone else right before getting married. This sets up another intention for Miles—to talk Jack out of this crazy idea, which is a futile endeavor, as Miles soon learns.

These competing intentions give energy to the story and to the characters, because the actors are playing the conflicting intentions between each other, but also the competing intentions within each of them. Miles didn't come to the wine country for sex, yet he truly likes Maya and, on some level, is clearly interested in this idea. Jack doesn't want to sabotage his wedding, and yet, on some level, he does.

Creating the Journey's Sequence of Events

Conflicts and goals—even action—by themselves are not enough to make a story move. Events must develop, progress, and advance so the journey truly takes the characters closer to a goal. One event needs to flow into another in order to create forward momentum. The second event is a consequence of the first. An action results in a reaction which results in another action which results in another reaction. The writer has to find a way to create scene sequences that are connected to each other so the story flows and has energy and direction.

How did the writers of *Sideways* do this? If Jack wants to get Miles laid, he'll have to find someone for Miles to lay with. He sees Maya and starts the ball rolling. They'll have a date the next night. The date goes well and they decide to go back to Stephanie's place, since that allows Jack to get the sex he wants, and hopefully to give Miles a bit of sex as well. But the rest of the evening doesn't go according to Jack's plan (in drama it usually doesn't).

In fact, Miles doesn't set up another date with Maya. So the initial intention set up a scene sequence that lasted for about twelve minutes. Now Jack's intention has to come back into play. He tries to push Miles into seeing Maya again, hoping things will work out better the second time. They do. The mission is accomplished, which is the end of this scene sequence. At this point, we might expect the music to swell and everyone is happy. Instead, the writers play a reversal. Unwittingly, Miles tells Maya about Jack's upcoming wedding. Maya is furious at Miles for deceiving her and Stephanie. She leaves him. Everything was working well and now everything is going wrong.

This reversal that affects Miles also affects Stephanie, since Maya tells her friend about Jack's impending wedding—to someone else. This sets in motion another sequence

of events. Stephanie hits Jack, breaking his nose, and leaves, which sets up the next series of events—Jack has to be taken to the hospital and has to figure out what to tell Christine about his bandaged nose. His wedding is in jeopardy, not because of Stephanie, who is now out of the picture, but because of the visible results that suggest Jack was up to no good. How can Jack explain the broken nose? If he doesn't explain it well, Christine might reject him.

The writers are constantly setting up catalysts to create action–reaction scene sequences which keep the story moving forward.

By the Second Turning Point, at 90 minutes into the film, both Jack and Miles have lost their new loves. In Act Three, the focus turns to the wedding and what has to be done to make sure that Jack doesn't lose his fiancée. This brings up a new set of obstacles. Jack is still intent on sex and has sex with a married waitress. When the husband comes home, Jack runs out and leaves his wallet behind. Now he has another objective—he has to get his wallet back, since the special wedding rings are in the wallet. Jack also has another objective—to find a way to justify his broken nose. He drives his car into a tree so he can claim he had an accident. He has to make sure Christine sees the wrecked car so that she'll buy the story and, of course, Jack can then get to the church on time.

Working with the Subplots

The film uses subplots to further deepen the characters' journeys and to keep the story moving forward. The subplots and the plot push at each other and become tightly connected with Jack's need to get to the church on time. A good subplot intersects and relates to the main storyline. The plot gives direction and the subplots give dimension, but the subplots also work as a catalyst to keep the "A" story moving. The subplot always has to thread back into the plotline in some way. A subplot is not freewheeling. It's not arbitrary. If it doesn't have at least a little push on the "A" storyline, then it is not relevant and can be cut.

Miles has two subplots. His major subplot is the story of his relationship with Maya, which we might call the Miles–Maya love story. He discovers she is now divorced.

A plot and a subplot begin because a character says “yes” instead of “no.” If Miles asks Jack, “Do you want to go up to wine country with me?” and Jack says no, there is no story. If Miles is interested in Maya and doesn’t pursue this, there is no story. That would mean that Miles has turned his back on the potential of a subplot. Characters make choices and as a result, the story evolves and unfolds. At the First Turning Point, Miles says yes to a double date with Jack and Stephanie and Maya. During Act Two, Miles and Maya develop their relationship, eventually sleeping together at the Second Turning Point of their subplot. Almost immediately, they break up because of Miles’s deception, which is the Climax of their subplot line. This ends the subplot with Maya until the Resolution of the entire film, when Maya writes to Miles and he decides to go to see her.

Miles’s second subplot involves the novel he hopes to get published, which we might call the novel story. When the novel is discussed in Act One, Jack presumes it will be published, although Miles doesn’t yet have a deal. At the First Turning Point, Maya asks to read it. At the Second Turning Point of this subplot, Miles learns that it has been turned down, again, and that his agent has no idea where else to send it. At the Climax of this subplot, Maya tells Miles that she read it and was very touched by it.

Jack’s journey can be divided into three separate storylines. The “A” storyline, or major storyline, might be called “Get Jack to the church on time.” It begins by establishing his relationship with his fiancée and her family and establishing the upcoming wedding. At the First Turning Point of this plotline, he meets Stephanie and spends Act Two getting to know her—in as many intimate ways as possible, which puts the wedding in jeopardy. Toward the end of Act Two, he breaks up with Stephanie, but isn’t ready to give up on other women—yet.

By the Second Turning Point, he realizes that his behavior is jeopardizing the wedding. He breaks down and cries and pleads with Miles to help him. At the Climax, he gets married.

Jack has a subplot with Stephanie: They meet at the First Turning Point and she agrees to have dinner with him and Miles and Maya, which begins the development of their relationship. In Act Two, he spends more time with her than with Miles. At the Second Turning Point of their relationship, we discover he’s made all sorts of promises

to her, and that she believed them. The actual Second Turning Point of this subplot is off-screen, which would be the moment that Maya tells Stephanie that Jack is getting married. Stephanie's reaction is the Climax of their storyline—she angrily leaves him right before Act Three begins.

Jack also has a small throughline with his fiancée, which can be separated from the main storyline by focusing on their relationship. He leaves her to go on the trip in Act One. During Act Two, he balances his relationships with her and with Stephanie through a series of phone calls and through his dates with Stephanie. At the Climax, he chooses the marriage.

What Is the Movie Really About?

No matter how simple the film, or what genre it is, a story needs to be about something. Drama tells us about the human condition: What are the problems most of us encounter in life? What are the issues that are important to us? Where is the meaning or the depth? Who are we and who are we becoming in the course of the journey?

Finding the theme can be a process, since many films are about a number of different ideas. But a good film has one overriding theme, one idea that is explored throughout the story.

In the case of *Sideways*, we can find some understanding of the theme by exploring the ideas contained in the title. To be “sideways” means to be drunk, three sheets to the wind, a wobbling and unfocused crab-like creature who can't move straight ahead, who can't see clearly where he's going, who walks to one side even though he might think he's going forward. The title implies characters who aren't moving on with life, who aren't standing straight up, who are moving sideways, sometimes even backward, instead of moving directly forward.

The metaphor also tells us something about the nature of wine. Wine can be about joy and camaraderie and fun and laughter, but it can also be about intoxication, when one can't talk straight or think straight. With too much wine, one escapes into a kind of oblivion, rather than living life fully.

We can apply this idea to the characters to see how each character represents some aspect of the theme.

Miles is stuck in the past. He hasn't gotten over his divorce.

Jack, who should be moving forward to his wedding, isn't looking forward to getting married. To him, marriage means the loss of freedom, and he'd rather look backward to his days as a rake, going after every woman who interests him.

Stephanie can't see beyond her nose. Although she might be discerning about wine, she's not discerning about people. Although we don't know where Stephanie's life heads after this episode, there is little reason to believe that she will go forward or make any changes. One might expect that the next man who comes along and romances her will receive the same response—flirtation, acceptance of whatever he says, wild sex, and rage when she discovers she's once more been deceived.

Maya is the contrasting character and the stable center of the film. If we want to know what it means to stop going sideways and to meet life head-on, we can look to Maya. She shows the possibilities of recreating a life after divorce. She proves that it's possible to face problems directly. Obstacles, setbacks, dashed dreams and hopes are part of life's journey, and rather than wallowing in them, denying them, or refusing to face them, she's not afraid to confront them and move forward toward her goals.

A good, rich, universal theme relates to the lives of the movie's characters, and also resonates with our own lives. Like the characters in *Sideways*, we also get stuck, we also despair, and we also look back to a past time that is gone and irretrievable. We also need forgiveness for our mistakes. We also need to be willing to start over, to go forward, to have something new and wonderful happen to us that will allow us to find something good in life again.

The Dialogue

The dialogue in *Sideways* serves the same function as most dialogue: it sets up the context by explaining the world of wine, it advances the action, it reveals character,

it suggests subtext, and it implies the theme. *Sideways* adds something else to dialogue, which is quite unusual—it creates metaphors.

In order to understand the movie, we need to understand the world of wine. The words are specific, not vague and general, and for many of us, the dialogue opens up a whole new special world.

Miles tells us about wine, and it is clear he is very knowledgeable:

“Color in red wines comes from the skins. This juice is free run, so there’s no skin contact in the fermentation, ergo no color.” (p. 9)

“I like all varietals. I just don’t generally like the way they manipulate chardonnay in California—too much oak and secondary malolactic fermentation.” (p. 23)

In contrast, Jack talks about wine in simple terms, with a nod to Miles’s specialist knowledge: “I like it. Tastes great. Oaky.” (p.47)

Great dialogue goes beyond insider knowledge. It evokes images and expresses the theme. It implies underlying feelings and perceptions. It is metaphoric.

This is shown in a scene between Miles and Maya, when they sit on the back porch and talk about wine. Usually dialogue is short and to the point and moves back and forth quickly between characters. Sometimes there is a long speech that is written so well that it becomes memorable and becomes one of the high points of the film. This scene is almost like an operatic duet: one sings about the glories of pinot noir and the other adds to the emotions by singing about the life of wine. Read this dialogue out loud and be aware that Miles is not just talking about wine, he’s talking about himself. This beautiful speech is rich with subtext and humor when you realize that the dialogue is operating on two different levels—it’s about Miles’s perception of pinot noir, and it’s about Miles’s perception of himself.

Maya asks, “Why are you so into pinot?” And Miles responds with a monologue:

MILES

I don’t know. It’s a hard grape to grow. As you know, it’s thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It’s

not a survivor like cabernet that can grow anywhere and thrive even when neglected. Pinot needs constant care and attention and in fact can only grow in specific little tucked-away corners of the world. And only the most patient and nurturing growers can do it really, can tap into Pinot's most fragile, delicate qualities. Only when someone has taken the time to truly understand its potential can Pinot be coaxed into its fullest expression. And when that happens, its flavors are the most haunting and brilliant and subtle and thrilling and ancient on the planet. (p. 69)

Miles sets up a metaphor about himself and pinot noir. He's not prosaic like a cabernet. Like pinot, he's sensitive. It's a delicate wine and needs to be nurtured, much like Miles needs to be nurtured. There's depth to it, much like Miles would like to think he, too, has a depth that takes a special person to tap into his special qualities.

Maya then responds with her own metaphor about wine and about herself:

MAYA

I do like to think about the life of wine, how it's a living thing. I like to think about what was going on the year that grapes were growing, how the sun was shining that summer or if it rained . . . what the weather was like. I think about all those people who tended and picked the grapes, and if it's an old wine, how many of them must be dead by now. I love how wine continues to evolve, how every time I open a bottle it's going to taste different than if I had opened it on any other day. Because a bottle of wine is actually alive—it's constantly evolving and gaining complexity. That is, until it peaks—like your '61—and begins its steady, inevitable decline. And it tastes so fucking good. (p. 70)

Maya is like the life of wine—she has passion and beauty and complexity. It might seem as if she’s talking about wine, but she’s really talking about her love of life and her desire for Miles. Like wine, Maya is constantly evolving and growing and gaining complexity. Just as we can.

Study Questions

1. In your writing, have you ever had to research a location? What did you learn about the Santa Ynez Valley as a result of watching *Sideways*?
2. How was wine used as a prop in *Sideways*? Can you think of a prop that you could use in your stories that would be similar to the use of wine in *Sideways*? Write a piece of metaphoric dialogue, similar to Miles’s speech about pinot noir, that would describe both your prop and also describe a character (see also the dialogue about the glove in the film *Shadow of a Doubt*).
3. Look at the dialogue Miles uses to introduce Jack to the world of wine. What particular words does Miles use to show his knowledge? What words does Jack use to show his lack of knowledge? Do any of your characters have an expertise in a particular subject? What insider knowledge might they use to establish their expertise without being obtuse?
4. Look at the structure of the plot and subplots of *Sideways*. Look at your own story to see if your subplots are dimensionalizing your plot while also moving it forward.
5. What words would you use to describe Stephanie, Maya, Miles, and Jack? What words and actions in the film establish their characters?



Dr. Linda Seger has consulted on over 2000 projects, including nearly 100 produced feature films and television shows, since defining the role of script consultant in 1981.



Linda has taught script consultant masterclasses for major film studios and television networks in the US and Europe, and presented screenwriting seminars at film schools and universities in over 30 countries. She is the author of 16 books, ten of them on screenwriting, including the bestselling *Making a Good Script Great*, *Creating Unforgettable Characters*, *Writing Subtext*, and *You Talkin' to Me: How to Write Great Dialogue*. Visit lindaseger.com to subscribe to her newsletter.

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