

HOW TO ANSWER THE “SCENE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS”

Sample Scene: “Spotting Maya” from *Sideways*

OBJECTIVES OF SCENE ANALYSIS:

Collect and Observe Facts

Delay Judgment

Try out Scenarios

Find the Beginning of the Scene

Create a Counterweight to the Dialogue-Driven Result of the Scene

“Scene Analysis Questions “ is a Worksheet. It is designed to help you refine and organize your understanding of a scene. There are no “right” answers, just your answers. I hope that you will find that your answers change as your understanding of the scene grows through reflection and rehearsal. For that reason, it’s imperative that you **write your answers in pencil**, and are ready an eager to erase your initial responses as new insights occur.

I expect that your first answers to the questions will be long-winded. That is natural. Through repetition and practice I hope you will make your answers more concise. Concise responses are what you want to give in response to actors’ questions. Concise formulations are like marching orders. They incite your actors to act. Remember, your goal is to inspire action – not invite debate and discussion.

What follows are my answers to the questions for the *Sideways* scene I call “Spotting Maya” (the scene can be found under “Class Materials” at bkkellman.com). On this document, after I give the answer, I explain why I chose to answer the question this way. I hope you find this helpful in your own approach to the Questions.

What are the **GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES – THE REAL STORY FACTS** in the lives of the characters and the story. List as many as you can:

ANSWER:

Jack and Miles are college buddies

They are both single.

Jack is engaged

The Wedding is in a week.
Miles is the Best Man
Miles is divorced.
Miles is a middle-school teacher.
Miles has written a novel.
Jack is an actor.
Miles is into wine.
They both play golf.
Miles stole \$900 from his mother.
Miles has made the itinerary, picked the restaurants and has plans of them
Miles has been to wine country and this restaurant before.

REASONING:

Each item is a fact. I try to drain as much opinion or conjecture out of the statement as I can. I do that so as to leave room for discovery through exploration and rehearsal. For example, I say they are college buddies rather than friends or best friends. It says more than “they went to college together” but less than “best friends”. I could say “college friends” but I think “buddies” is a bit more accurate. It strikes me as somehow more historical. Of course, I write that in pencil so I can always revise and refine the statement. Notice that I could say “Jack is getting married in a week” but, is he? That’s the story we are exploring. So I break it down into its factual components: “Jack is engaged” – “The wedding is in a week.”

Finally, notice that this is not a synopsis of all the incidents and scenes that have occurred. These are the underlying facts (circumstances) that are pressing on the characters throughout the action up until this point.

What are the **GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES – THE REAL STORY FACTS** in the lives of the characters and the story *that apply to this scene*? Make a selection from your complete list.

ANSWER:

Miles and Jack have arrived in wine country.
Their “Boys’ Week” has been kicked off with a couple of wine tastings.
Miles has been to this restaurant before.

REASONING:

In order to enter each scene with a hopeful, winning attitude, we make a fact selection that is open to all positive possibilities. Regardless of what has gone before the fact is this is the first big meal that Miles has planned for the weekend. Entering the scene he should be fueled by his most positive expectations. We must carry only the simple facts so as not to be weighted down with negative baggage or predictive anticipation of what will occur as the scene unfolds. That tendency to anticipate is what we want to resist.

What are the **IMMEDIATE CIRCUMSTANCES** – *where are we and what’s happening RIGHT NOW?*

ANSWER:

They are settling in for their first great meal

REASONING:

This is super simple and as wide open as I can make it. I don’t say, “being seated”, because I want to be open to exploring the possibility that they are being shown to a table. I assume that I don’t yet know what the best way to stage the scene is, so I want to leave my mind open.

The clarity, brevity and obviousness of this category is aimed at helping you focus on the specifics of “now”. What are the givens? What can you decide?

Give a name to the **OCCASION** for the scene.

ANSWER:

Launching a marriage

REASONING:

Why not say “Kicking off a Bachelor Week”? I could – it would be factual. Here’s why: I have read the script. I know what has happened before, I know where the story is going, and I know where this scene will be trending. I want to tell myself things that will *create a counterweight* to the trend of the dialogue and the inevitable direction of the scene. This will help me keep the action alive, and the unavoidable outcome at least in doubt. If I tell myself “Kicking off a Bachelor Week” it makes it appropriate and normal for Jack to be focused on hooking up with women. Isn’t that the barely hidden agenda of “Bachelor Week” after all?

In resisting that, Miles becomes a prig and a spoilsport. He is led to play a negative. But by reminding myself and my actors of the true and original purpose of this week – to prepare for and celebrate Jack’s incipient marriage – we give Miles the power of an upbeat purpose and allow Jack to be the spoiler. Giving Miles power helps to, at least, slow Jack down...which is what we need to do in telling a story that very rapidly and relentlessly leads in the direction of Jack’s mischief.

What are the **GOVERNING SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS** that rule the scene? Are there any rules, rituals, ceremonies or behaviors that the occasion, setting or relationship require.

ANSWER:

- Restaurant decorum
- Fine-Dining decorum
- Special Occasion Celebration Behavior
- Best Man Role Rituals
- Buddy (Bro) Obligations

REASONING:

Often, there are more than one obligation or type of etiquette that applies to a scene. That’s a good thing because it creates conflict when two obligations compete with one another. First we acknowledge and remind ourselves of the obvious – we are in a public place, a restaurant to be exact. There are certain social expectations like “use your restaurant voice” etc. that most of us were brought up to know. Of course that doesn’t mean we don’t sometimes violate that expectation and raise our voices. But, when we do so, we are in violation of an obligation, and people notice. This reminds us to account for that.

Then there’s the added layer of “Fine-Dining.” This is a serious restaurant. It’s not the same as the greasy spoon at which the boys had their breakfast. How are we to behave in such a place? Is everyone living up to that expectation? Do we know all the rules? Do we know what all the items of silverware in the table setting are? Calling our

attention to “Fine Dining” reminds us to explore these unspoken aspects of the scene.

“Special Occasion Celebration Behavior” – stating this helps us remember that they did not just arrive at this place by chance. This is a place and evening that a best man has planned for his groom. Is there a sense of ceremony that is meant to go with that. Miles has planned it – is it a low-key plan or a showy one? What does Miles want it to be? This note reminds us of Miles’ authorship and ownership of the dinner. That awareness raises the stakes if the dinner conversation is not what he hoped it would be.

“Buddy (Bro) Obligations” asks what is a modern best man supposed to do for the groom, and what is the groom supposed to do for the best man. These guys have known each other for decades but they’ve never played these roles before. This reminds us that both men are in fact exploring new roles.

“Best Man Role Rituals” is in conflict with itself, and therefore ripe for drama and comedy. Is Miles supposed to be the “Best Man” who is about to be a member of the wedding ceremony, or the “Best Man” among “Bro’s” who has the obligation of covering a grooms misdeeds?

IMAGINARY CIRCUMSTANCES - Come up with a **USEFUL IMAGINARY FACT**. Look for something that would enhance the characters’ commitment to objectives. Suggestions **may not contradict REAL FACTS**.

ANSWER:

Jack is picking up the tab. On this trip they are splitting the lodgings, Miles is paying for the golf but Jack is paying for the wine and food.

Jack has a condom in his wallet.

REASONING:

The script tells us very little about how this trip got arranged. Who initiated the idea and what are the financial arrangements? We mustn’t assume that these things are unimportant. They are important in life so they must be important to us for the sake of our characters. The writer

doesn't tell us, so there's room for us to try out scenarios and see how they affect our characters' behavior. Keep in mind that we are looking to make choices that help tell the story by keeping the action alive and full of possibility.

Money is a reality. It is always an issue in people's lives; at the very least it's a practical issue. We know they are spending "a week" before the wedding on the road. We don't know if that's a seven-day week, or six days or five... I assume at least five. If one were spending four days I doubt he'd refer to it as "a week". We know that Miles is a middle school teacher and has at least enough financial need to motivate his stealing \$900 from his mother. Assume that \$900 and the stop at her house – of which Jack was unaware – was to get the money to fund the trip. We don't know that \$900 is the total amount he now has on him, but we have reason to expect that he doesn't have much more. Let's assume he has \$1000 – what will that fund?

Go on line – a search of motels in this region of California comes up with an average price of \$150 per night. We figure they've booked for at least five nights. Then there are the golf fees. Then lunches and dinners and wine tastings, gas, and, finally dinners at great restaurants with multiple bottles of fine wine. Do the math. How far will Miles' \$1000 take him? So I come up with an imaginary agreement that seems sociable to me and that Miles could afford.

Why does this matter besides making for extra "homework" and just filling in blanks the audience doesn't care about (and therefore the writer left out)? Because *it has the potential to inform Miles' behavior in this scene.*

Think of this as a hypothesis – a theory one tests to see what results it produces:

Miles is the one who cares about fine food and fine wine. Jack doesn't. Miles has chosen the restaurant and will take the lead on ordering. That's his role both as an oenophile and as the author of the dinner. If Jack is paying, Miles can afford to get try pricey stuff at Jack's expense, while seeming to be doing it for Jack's benefit. *This is selfishness in the guise of generosity.* And that very human hypocrisy is the stuff of comedy.

Jack's wallet condom? It's something he used to do back in the day and, well, just in case...

This is flawed human behavior. This is real. It is also comic. That's why I am eager to try out these imaginary facts and see how they play, knowing, of course, that I can always amend them if they don't.

Try to imagine the **MOMENT BEFORE** the scene in a way that adds specificity, energy or otherwise enhances the actors' sense of reality.

ANSWER:

The Maître D recognized Miles and gave him a hearty welcome; Miles shook his hand and gave him a \$20 tip.

REASONING:

This place is a "home game" for Miles. One that he doesn't get to take advantage of it often enough. We know that. in the preceding scene, Miles was recognized by the bartender. Perhaps the maître d also greeted him and, since Miles doesn't have to pay for dinner, he can afford at \$20 tip to look and feel like a big sport. I want Miles to feel like a champ, to feel in charge going into this scene. I want him on top so he has somewhere to slide down from as the evening progresses.

What is your central character's **OBJECTIVE?** What is his or her **AGENDA** in this encounter?

ANSWER:

Miles wants to show his buddy a world where he is known and respected. He wants to eat a terrific meal and drink a lot of expensive wine with someone else paying for it.

COVER - Can the agenda be pursued openly or does your character need a cover? What's his/her cover?

ANSWER:

Miles definitely needs a cover. His is that it's all about and for Jack. It's Jack's trip...Miles chose the itinerary for Jack's maximum prenuptial pleasure.

RESPONSE:

This gives Miles plausible deniability: “Hey man, I’m doing this all for you? This is a special occasion – you only get married once (hopefully) we’ve got to send you off it style!”

Also, it’s worth noting that sometimes a cover is a lie that one tells even to oneself.

What is the main **OBSTACLE** to your character achieving his/her agenda?

ANSWER:

Jack’s indifference to the quality of food and wine.

Jack’s impatience with form.

What is your character **DOING** to achieve his/her objective? *What tactics or strategy does he/she employ?*

ANSWER:

Miles takes charge of everything. He is the tour guide. He makes choices for Jack.

RESPONSE:

This is simple, positive and active. As long as Miles is in control of the agenda and the action, he is successfully pursuing his objective. When Jack moves the focus of the dinner toward a contemplation of a woman rather than a meal Miles is at risk of losing control. Everything Miles is Doing is in service of keeping the evening on the course he has charted.

What **CHANGE** occurs between the beginning of the scene and the end? Look for and state the obvious, the plot purpose of the scene. This is something on the surface that can be said.

ANSWER:

Jack Zeroes in on Maya for Miles

What is the **EVENT OF THE SCENE**? What “happens” to whom? This is something unnamed that happens beneath the surface action.

ANSWER:

A tiny (dangerous) spark of hope is kindled in Miles

Barnet Kellman August 19, 2018