

LEVELED Book • U

Hiking the Appalachian Trail

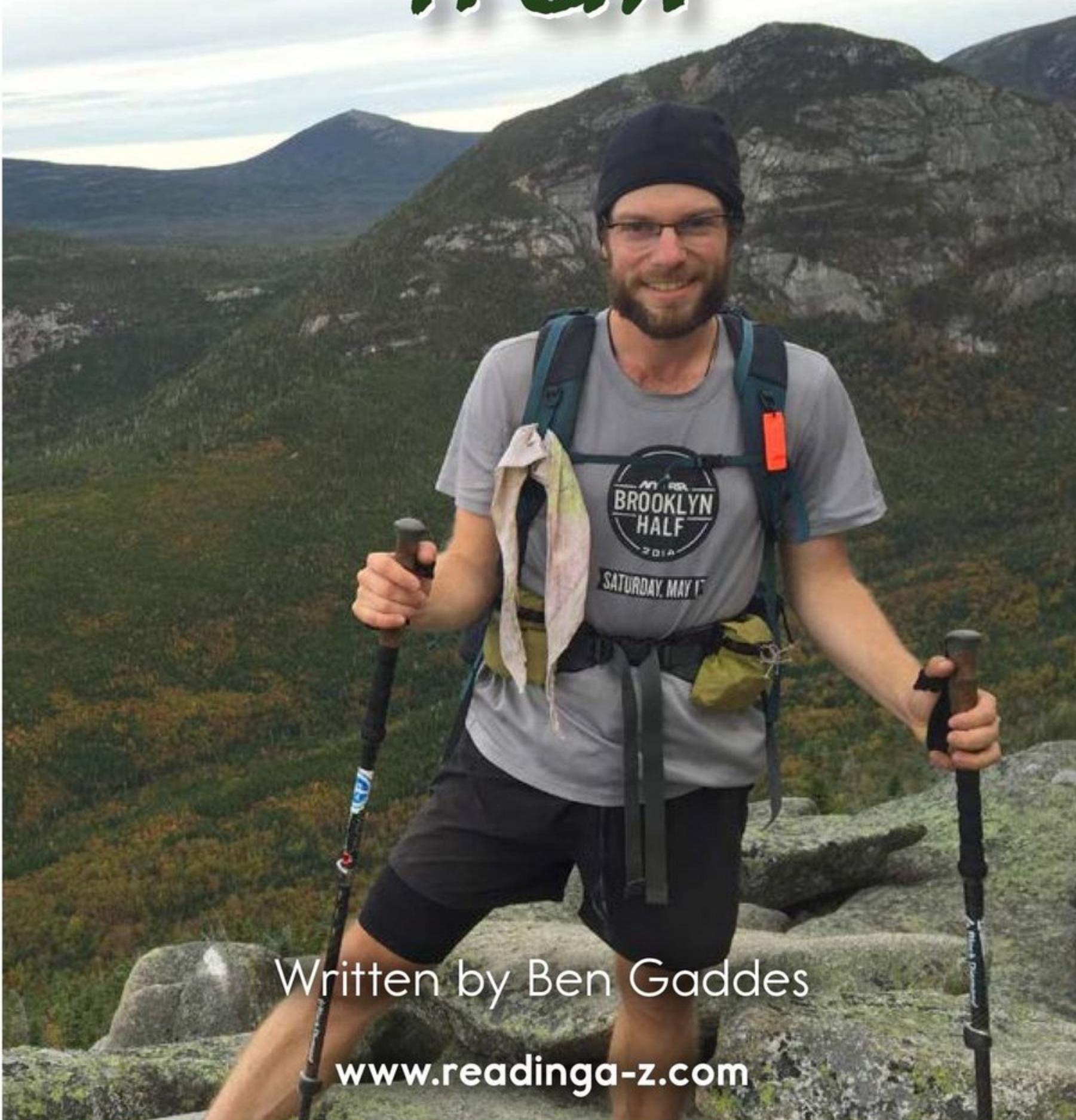


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Written by Ben Gaddes

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Focus Question

What are the challenges and rewards of hiking the Appalachian Trail?

Words to Know

acclimate

lean-to

filtered

replenish

footpath

summitted

hygiene

terrain

hypothermia

thru-hiking

insurmountable

traversed

Front cover: Beautiful clouds rolled in at the end of a long day in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Back cover: I came across this quiet beach along the trail in Maine.

Page 3: These spiderwebs caught my eye just after sunrise in New Hampshire.

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Correlation

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I encountered many different types of landscapes on my hike, from steep mountains to the rolling fields of Pennsylvania pictured here.

Introduction

My name is Ben. In 2015, I became so overwhelmed with my work as a therapist that I needed an especially long break. I decided it was time to fulfill a childhood dream and hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail.

The Appalachian Trail, or “A.T.” is nearly one hundred years old. It connects the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States along their highest ridgelines. When the trail was completed in 1937, the A.T. became the world’s longest hiking-only **footpath**. It still holds that title.

The A.T. begins on Springer Mountain in Georgia and travels over 2,000 miles (3,000 km) north, ending on Mount Katahdin in Maine. It goes through fourteen U.S. states. The **terrain** covers farmland, runs alongside rivers, travels above the trees, and even goes through backyards.

The Appalachian Trail



You must take a canoe to cross the Kennebec River, an official part of the trail in Maine.

October 1, 2016
Mount Katahdin ↑

Mahoosuc Notch in southern Maine, with its jumbled and slippery boulders, was the most difficult mile on the trail.



My sneakers wore out (right) just before I crossed into New Jersey, so I changed to a new pair (left).



It was painful to hike this rocky section of the trail in Pennsylvania.

APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS



I didn't forget to brush my teeth—even on the go!

April 4, 2016
Springer Mountain
Georgia



Hiking an entire long-distance trail in one year is called **thru-hiking**. Thousands of people try to complete an A.T. thru-hike each year. Only a few hundred, including me, succeed. Most thru-hikers begin the trail in spring and hike north, as I did, since it is already warm down south in springtime.



Here I am at Springer Mountain, mile zero of the Appalachian Trail.

I took my first step from Springer Mountain, Georgia, on April 4, 2016. The next few days were some of the most difficult. My body and mind had to **acclimate** to the daily challenges of hiking.

Fun Facts about the Appalachian Trail

- ▲ **Length:** 2,190 miles (3,524 km)
- ▲ **Steps on an A.T. thru-hike:** Approximately five million
- ▲ **Highest point:** Clingman's Dome, North Carolina–Tennessee border, 6,643 feet (2,025 m) above sea level
- ▲ **Elevation gain and loss:** Equivalent to hiking Mount Everest from sea level and back—sixteen times!
- ▲ **First and oldest thru-hiker:** Earl V. Shaffer, first in 1948 at thirty years old and again in 1998 at eighty years old
- ▲ **Record for fastest A.T. thru-hike:** 45 days, 22 hours, 38 minutes

Preparation Is Key

I spent several months intensively preparing for my thru-hike. I walked wherever I could while wearing my heavy pack, often in poor weather. I got a job at an outdoor store to learn more about hiking supplies and tried to save money.

I did a practice hike across the Brooklyn Bridge wearing my backpack full of supplies.



I practiced setting up my tent inside my apartment.

Thru-Hiking Gear

- ▲ Backpack, tent, trekking poles
- ▲ Sleeping bag, sleeping pad, sitting pad
- ▲ Down jacket, rain jacket, poncho, rain skirt, pack cover
- ▲ Waterproof bags, food/bear bag, rope
- ▲ Camping stove, fuel, lighter
- ▲ Water bottles, water filter, purification tablets
- ▲ First aid kit, repair kit, mini-pocketknife
- ▲ Earplugs
- ▲ Sanitary kit, toothbrush/toothpaste, towel
- ▲ Hat, gloves, bandanna, underwear, long underwear, T-shirt, shorts, pants, long-sleeved shirt, balaclava
- ▲ Hiking sneakers, camp shoes, camp socks, sock liners, wool socks, gaiters
- ▲ Headlamp, smartphone, headphones, GPS tracker, backup batteries

Total Average Pack Weight = 21 pounds (9.5 kg) with a day's food, some stove fuel, and a liter of water

Total Gear Cost = nearly \$2,500





McAfee's Knob in Virginia is the most photographed place on the Appalachian Trail.

The Trail Community

Ever since I had heard about the A.T. as a kid, its trail community intrigued me. Just imagine an entire community, constantly moving at different speeds, sprawled across 2,190 miles (3,524 km) of continuous trail measuring only a few feet wide. Interesting people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities choose to hike the A.T. each year. Many people hike to help them recover from tragedies. I even met families hiking the whole trail together. Everyone I met was on the A.T. for a reason.

Some thru-hikers hiked with a group, but I chose to hike alone most of the time. I enjoyed meeting new people and keeping my own schedule. Whenever I felt lonely, I could always seek out friends in fellow hikers.

Daily Challenges

One of the most difficult aspects of hiking every single day was just that—hiking every single day! On a typical day on the trail, I woke up with the Sun. I hiked until I reached my daily goal and got to camp just before sunset. Most thru-hikers, myself included, eat inexpensive foods that are lightweight, are easy to prepare, and won't spoil.

The number of miles I hiked each day depended on the weather and the terrain. My personal goals and level of exhaustion also affected my daily mileage. I typically tried to stay at campsites with a **lean-to** shelter, a water source, and an outhouse. Otherwise, I set up my small tent.



Shelters were generally small, such as this one in Pennsylvania (top), and also crowded, such as this one in the Smoky Mountains (bottom).



If I was unable to find a space in a shelter, I set up my tent, as I did in this forest in Vermont.

Every few days I went into a nearby town to **replenish** my food supply, take a shower, and do my laundry. I learned that properly resting and resupplying were just as important as hiking.

On rainy days, I planned my whole day around arriving at a shelter in time to secure a spot. Shelters can fill up quickly in bad weather. Sometimes it rained nonstop for several days in a row, and I couldn't fully dry out until I reached a town.

Math Minute

If my hike took six months, about how far did I hike each month?

Answer: 365 miles (587 km)



Hikers store anything with a food odor on "bear poles" to avoid attracting bears to their campground.

The most important concern while hiking is safety. I encountered black bears, venomous snakes, and disease-carrying ticks on the trail. Knowing what to do when faced with unsavory critters is critical to staying safe in the woods. I tried to remain calm, act respectfully, and maintain a safe distance.

I **filtered** all my water and was cautious about my **hygiene** to avoid getting sick. To prevent **hypothermia**, I stayed dry and warm. Having the right

shoes and listening to my body's limits helped me avoid injuries. Keeping my gear well organized allowed me to be prepared in case of an emergency. Staying in touch with loved ones was also important to me.

Intense heat caused most water sources to dry up in New York, so I filtered puddle water.



Although I felt very happy most of the time, one of the biggest challenges I faced was that hiking wasn't always fun. I was often hungry, exhausted, and sore. Sometimes I was even bored. I learned that the best way to overcome these challenges was to lean on the people around me for support.

Like the beginning of my hike, the end was difficult. With the fall season in full swing, it had started getting cold at night, and I was hungrier than I had ever felt. The mountains of northern New England were undoubtedly the hardest to climb. My pace was cut in half as I traversed the rocky ranges of southern Maine. After nearly six months of hiking, I did it—
I summited Mount Katahdin on October 1, 2016!

However difficult they were, these last days on the trail were also unlike my first. I felt as though I was a different person than when I had started hiking. I never felt so strong, confident, and accomplished. As a child, I rarely played sports, but now I could call myself an athlete for the first time.



After hiking more than 2,000 miles (3,000 km), I was skinnier and dirtier than when I began.

Reflections

Since I finished my hike, many people have asked me about my favorite memories. My fondest memories were those times when a challenge that seemed **insurmountable** turned into something beautiful.

One night when I was camping alone on a treeless mountaintop, strong winds and heavy rain caused my tent to collapse. I became frustrated and afraid. At 3:00 a.m., I gave up trying to sleep and decided to pack my belongings, eat breakfast, and start hiking. What followed was the most amazing sunrise I had ever seen, all alone on a mountaintop. I had faced a challenge that at first seemed impossible but over time transformed into something incredible.

Many people have asked me, “How did you do it?” I tell them that I hiked the Appalachian Trail the same way you do anything else: one step at a time. People have also asked me, “Why did you do it?”



After the most challenging night of my adventure, I enjoyed beautiful views of the Roan Highlands in Tennessee.



I often think about the beautiful places I visited, including Mount Katahdin in Maine.

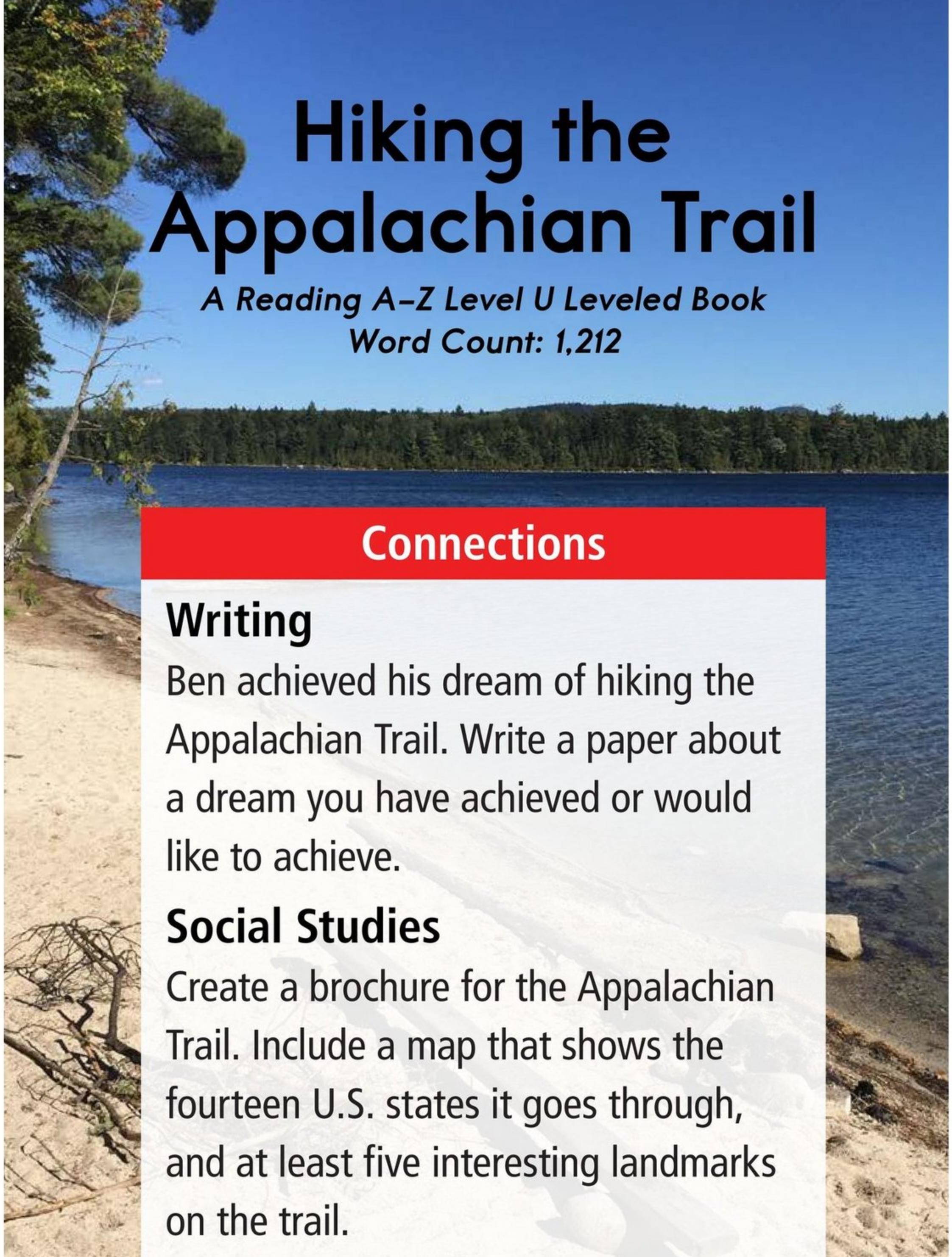
Looking back, the reasons I kept going were different from my reasons when I began. I felt so surrounded by love and support from those around me and at home that I never wanted to stop.

I'm writing this book several months after finishing my thru-hike. My knees still hurt from those five million steps. I was away from people I love for six months. So you might be wondering, was it worth it?

I followed a dream, one step after another, for five million steps. No one can ever take that accomplishment away from me. It took months of careful preparation to hike the A.T., and failure was always looming. I faced many dangers and challenges along the way. I planned, saved money, and learned to live on a tight budget. I also learned to value every item I carried because my life depended on it. I made friends from around the world, and I grew closer to the people in my life who were cheering from the sidelines. Despite all the challenges, in the end, thru-hiking was an invaluable experience.

Glossary

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| acclimate (<i>v.</i>) | to get used to a new climate or situation (p. 6) |
| filtered (<i>v.</i>) | passed something, such as a liquid or a gas, through a device or material to separate out unwanted items (p. 12) |
| footpath (<i>n.</i>) | a narrow trail or path made for people to walk along (p. 4) |
| hygiene (<i>n.</i>) | cleanliness for the purpose of staying healthy (p. 12) |
| hypothermia (<i>n.</i>) | a dangerously low body temperature (p. 12) |
| insurmountable (<i>adj.</i>) | impossible to overcome or achieve (p. 14) |
| lean-to (<i>n.</i>) | a small shelter with a sloping roof that is held up by rocks, posts, or trees (p. 10) |
| replenish (<i>v.</i>) | to fill something up again (p. 11) |
| summited (<i>v.</i>) | reached the highest point of a mountain (p. 13) |
| terrain (<i>n.</i>) | the natural features of a piece of land; ground (p. 4) |
| thru-hiking (<i>n.</i>) | hiking a long-distance trail from beginning to end within a single hiking season (p. 6) |
| traversed (<i>v.</i>) | moved through or across an area (p. 13) |



Hiking the Appalachian Trail

A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,212

Connections

Writing

Ben achieved his dream of hiking the Appalachian Trail. Write a paper about a dream you have achieved or would like to achieve.

Social Studies

Create a brochure for the Appalachian Trail. Include a map that shows the fourteen U.S. states it goes through, and at least five interesting landmarks on the trail.



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