

Hiking the Appalachian Trail

A Reading A-Z Level R Leveled Book

Word Count: 938

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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Hiking the Appalachian Trail

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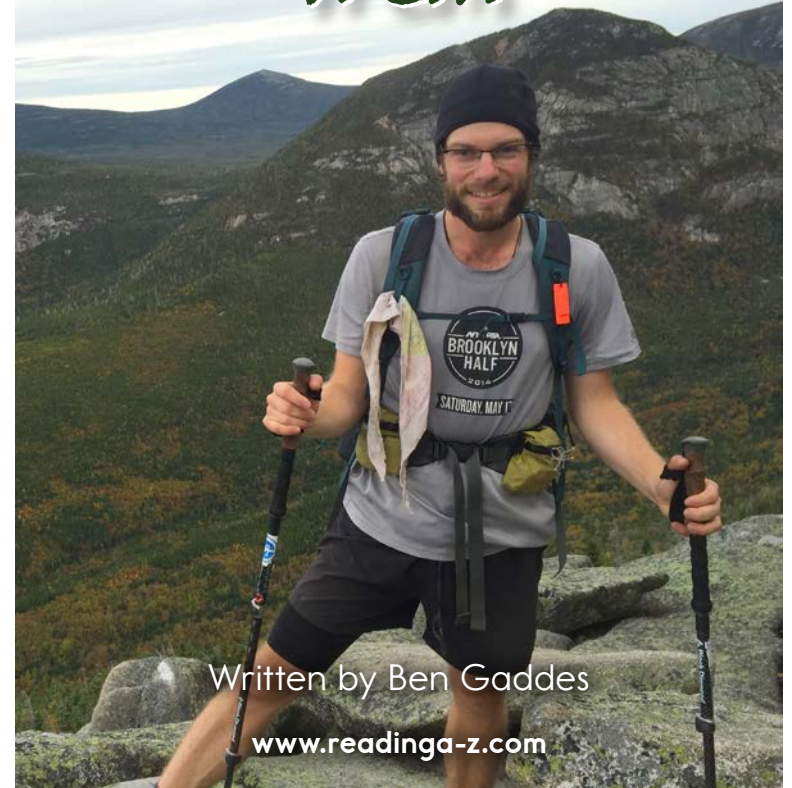
Written by Ben Gaddes

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Glossary

budget (<i>n.</i>)	a plan for how to spend money for a set period of time (p. 15)
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)
lean-to (<i>n.</i>)	a small shelter with a sloping roof that is held up by rocks, posts, or trees (p. 10)
spoil (<i>v.</i>)	to become unfit to eat (p. 10)
summitted (<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. 10)
thru-hiking (<i>n.</i>)	hiking a long-distance trail from beginning to end within a single hiking season (p. 6)
transformed (<i>v.</i>)	changed in form or appearance (p. 14)

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Focus Question

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

Words to Know

budget	summitted
filtered	terrain
footpath	thru-hiking
lean-to	transformed
spoil	

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

I took a big risk and did something I had always wanted to do. I planned, saved money, and lived on a tight **budget**. I learned to value every item I carried because my life depended on it. In spite of the challenges, in the end, thru-hiking the A.T. was an amazing experience.



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



Reflections

Since I finished my hike, many people have asked me about my favorite memories. One is from a night when I was camping alone on a 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 packed up, ate breakfast, and started hiking. What followed was the most amazing sunrise I had ever seen. A scary experience had **transformed** into something beautiful.

Many people have asked me, “How did you do it?” I tell them that I did it the same way you do anything else: one step at a time. People have also asked me, “Why did you do it?” Looking back, the reasons I kept going were different from my reasons when I began. The love and support from those around me and at home made me never want to stop.



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Introduction

My name is Ben. In 2015, I decided it was time to fulfill my childhood dream and go on a very long walk—along the Appalachian Trail, or “A.T.”

The A.T. connects the Appalachian Mountains, in the eastern United States, along their highest points. Completed in 1937, it was and still is the world’s longest hiking-only **footpath**. The A.T. begins in Georgia and travels over 2,000 miles (3,000 km) north. It goes through fourteen U.S. states and ends in Maine.



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

Like the beginning of my hike, the end was difficult. With the fall season in full swing, it had started getting cold at night. I was hungrier than I had ever felt. The mountains in Maine were the hardest to climb. Still, after nearly six months of hiking, I completed the A.T.! On October 1, 2016, I **summited** Mount Katahdin.

While my last days on the trail were difficult, they were unlike my first. I felt strong and confident. As a child, I rarely played sports, but after thru-hiking, I felt proud that I could call myself an athlete.



After hiking more than 2,000 miles (3,000 km), I lost around 20 pounds (9.1 kg).

The most important concern while hiking is safety. I saw bears, snakes, and ticks on the trail. I tried to remain calm and keep a safe distance.

I **filtered** my water, tried to stay dry and warm, and kept clean to avoid getting sick. Having the right shoes and listening to my body's limits helped me avoid injuries. Keeping my gear well organized helped me be prepared in case of an emergency. Staying in touch with loved ones was also important.



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

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



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

The Appalachian Trail



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, but only a few hundred, like me, succeed. Most thru-hikers begin in spring and hike north, as I did, since it's already warm down south.



At times, the trail felt endless—but it was still beautiful, as it is here in North Carolina.

Fun Facts about the Appalachian Trail

- ⬆ **Length:** 2,190 miles (3,524 km)
- ⬆ **Steps on an A.T. thru-hike:** Around five million
- ⬆ **Highest point:** Clingman's Dome, North Carolina—Tennessee border, 6,643 feet (2,025 m) above sea level
- ⬆ **Elevation gain and loss:** Equal 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

On rainy days, I planned my day around getting to a shelter before it filled up. Sometimes it rained nonstop for several days in a row, and I couldn't fully dry out until I reached a town.



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

Every few days I went into a nearby town to buy more food, take a shower, and do laundry. I learned that resting and making sure I had the proper supplies were just as important as hiking.

Math Minute

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

Answer: 365 miles (587 km)

Daily Challenges

One of the most difficult parts of hiking every single day was just that—hiking every single day! Most days on the trail, I woke up at sunrise, hiked until I reached my daily goal, and got to camp just before sunset. Like most thru-hikers, I ate food that was lightweight, was easy to prepare, and didn't **spoil**.



If I couldn't find a space in a shelter, I set up my tent, as I did in this forest in Vermont.

The number of miles I hiked daily depended on the weather and **terrain** as well as my personal goals and how tired I felt. I tried to stay at campsites with a **lean-to** shelter, a water source, and an outhouse. Otherwise, I set up my small tent.

Preparation Is Key

I spent several months preparing for my thru-hike. I practiced hiking while wearing my heavy pack, even in poor weather. I got a job at an outdoor store to learn about hiking gear and tried to save money.



I practiced setting up my tent inside my apartment.

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



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

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 heard about the A.T. as a child, I wanted to be a part of its trail community. People of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities hike the A.T. each year. Many people hike to help them recover from sad events. I even met families hiking the whole trail together. Everyone was on the A.T. for a reason.

Some thru-hikers hike with a group, but I hiked alone most of the time. I enjoyed meeting different people and keeping my own schedule. Whenever I felt lonely, I could always find friends in other hikers.