

Maine Huts & Trails Leader Report

On September 28-29, 2018, my class, EN 382: Environmental Writing, ventured up the Stratton Brook Hut for an overnight visit. The purpose of the trip was both to make sure these writers, whose text was environment, had a recent exposure to some of what Maine has to offer in terms of relatively undeveloped spaces; and to provide a moment for reflection and drafting.

The students were driven in two vans from campus to the Stratton Brook trailhead, arriving there about 3:30 that Friday. I assigned the class a task, borrowed from Thoreau: “What business have I in the woods if I am thinking of something out of the woods?” In other words, I asked them to be aware of times when they were not with us on the hike, but were back on campus, or at their homes, or anywhere but on the trail leading up to the Hut. Students reported later a variety of responses: some were able to be intently conscious of where they were and what they were doing, for long stretches of times; for others, it was a constant struggle, and even a suggestion they rebelled against.

At the Hut we ate dinner (which had to be especially constructed for us, due to one student’s intense food allergies), and then gathered in the screened in porch to be given a writing prompt. It was this:

One approach might be to take the Experience of Place approach, and attempt to render the experience of walking up to the Hut, being there, sleeping there, in a way that evokes that experience for the interested reader, giving them the vicarious experience. This is what good travel writing does: it both describes the Place, the experience the writer has there, but also tries to communicate what it is like to be in that Place in an interesting way that any reader can appreciate, even if they are never going to be in that Place, have no intention of ever being there.

Or you might think about how noticing is a type of prayer, keeping in mind that prayer means to “ask earnestly, entreat; beg” at least in some traditions. What entreaty is your prayer making that is answered by your noticing?

Or, pay attention to your ability (or inability) to follow Thoreau’s guidance about returning to our senses in our walks, and not committing the sin of thinking of something out of the woods while you are in the woods. An essay might go back and forth from being in the woods to what draws you out of them.

Or, you might consider the braided essay approach, as we saw in the excerpt from *H is for Hawk*. The parts of the braid might be experiences on the trip today, plus other similar, relevant excursions, plus entirely other types of

material: the history of the Huts, a lecture on nuclear radiation, anything that contributes to the whole.

Or, take your own approach to the experience.

I didn't ask the students to have a complete draft done by the time we left, but only to take some notes, decide on an approach, and consider using this prompt for a polished piece we could use in workshop. Students did an excellent job of drafting that evening and the next morning.

Later, we sat by the fire under a starry sky, with a late moon rising, and did what any group of campers might do, minus the marshmallows.

In the morning I asked for volunteers to share whatever they'd written. Most students did, and most of the notes and sketched out drafts were excellent, just what I'd hoped. By the end of the semester, two of the nine students had composed a complete piece based on the night at the Hut; two others had used portions of the experience in a complete piece; two others composed "flash nonfictions" using portions of the trip in experiments that didn't find their way into the final portfolio.

Following breakfast, photo-taking from the spectacular look-out spot, and hearing from drafts, we gathered ourselves and went back down the hill. I didn't give an assignment, but several students commented on the difference they felt from the second hike; not just because of the fact they were going downhill, but because a change had happened, a comfort had been obtained, and a sense of accomplishment, even though a modest accomplishment.

Again, as in 2017, the staff of the Hut was excellent, and the arrangements made through the MH&T office were spot on. The staff handled our dietary restrictions without a hitch, as well as our housing arrangements. Plus, the weather was superb.

Students on the trip were these:

Jamie Attanasio
Rachel Benway
Kaili Blazon
Annie Byrnes
Sage Jordan
Lily Lake
Dominick Leskiw
Sophia Pelosi
Jamie Pine