

Final Reflection on My 2025 Summer Enrichment Experience at Simon's Rock Young Writer's Workshop at Bard College

By Reka Nabe

Finishing the Young Writers' Workshop was very bittersweet; looking around at all of my departing peers, I thought of how much we'd accomplished as a group. Though the time flew by, I'm astounded by the number of brand-new experiences I had at Simon's Rock. It's odd to think that I'll never see many of the people I met at YWW again—they were such a big part of my life throughout the program, and it still hasn't quite sunk in that that part is essentially gone forever (minus my other GFF friend, Emily, who also attended the workshop).

The sheer volume of writing that I generated at YWW—a hefty chunk of my notebook—stunned me upon completion of the program. I was pushed away from the idea that everything I write has to be worthy of publishing, so most pieces didn't get revised, but each exercise helped me expand my abilities. My workshop group was focused more on the process of writing and bringing our pieces on “excursions” than on perfecting tiny details. Much of our workshop time was spent doing writing exercises like private free writes and “found” poems (poems that utilized words and phrases from another piece of writing). We were training our brains to think creatively and accept new ideas. My workshop leader, Irene, taught me how important it is not to discard quick or informal writing, since sometimes the “junk” pieces blossom into something truly profound. This was how the main piece I included in my final portfolio came to be—Irene told us to “give some love” to something we had forgotten in our notebooks, and I rediscovered a short paragraph I'd written early on that grew into an intense three-page personal essay.

Going into YWW, my goal was to strengthen my voice and figure out who I am as a writer and a thinker. All of the writing I did—even some of the “nonsense” poetry and outlandish

fantasy I wrote—made me explore what was swimming around in my subconscious. I wrote about my frustrations with the world, my thoughts on veganism, and the world from the perspective of peas, and all of these contributed to my understanding of what goes on in my brain. I began to notice patterns in my streams of consciousness, how one topic would flow to another, which showed me a lot about my values.

Working in groups to give feedback made me a much better constructive critic. Initially, everyone in my workshop group was very tame and not entirely truthful with criticisms. We didn't want to offend our peers, so we filtered our comments extensively. Irene reminded us that it was up to the writer which advice to take, so putting suggestions out there wasn't going to hurt any writing or take control away from the author. Over time, we abandoned our restraint, and the workshops became more productive and really helped each of us shape our pieces.

In addition to all of the writing we were doing throughout the workshop, we read multiple pieces a day by a myriad of authors, ranging anywhere from Sylvia Plath to Shakespeare. I was introduced to many new types of writing, like the villanelle, which is a type of poem I'd never encountered before. We often drew inspiration from other authors' writing, experimenting with the structures of their work and writing pieces that stemmed directly from their language. I attempted blackout poetry for the first time—subtracting words from another piece to generate a poem—and had a lot of fun with the challenge.

The environment at Simon's Rock was warm and welcoming, with several friendly RAs and a few other staff members who would provide help if asked. All of the workshop leaders that I interacted with were very sweet and knowledgeable, and the majority of my peers had positive views of their instructors. Based on my friends' accounts, workshops varied greatly depending on the leader—some would have multiple homework assignments, others would have none at all,

and each workshop read very different material. My homework load was always reasonable, and I never felt particularly overwhelmed, but I knew a few people who would stress over their evening assignments.

Simon's Rock is a very small college, so the campus was completely walkable, and I didn't have a hard time finding my way around. This helped me acclimate to life on campus much more easily—a thirty-minute walk at the beginning of YWW showed me everything I needed to see. It was nice to be able to head over to the library or student union in just a few minutes when I wanted some quiet time to finish a writing assignment or revise a piece for my portfolio.

On most days, the RAs would host small events after classes: bracelet making, collaging, movies in the pool (my personal favorite), and plenty of other options. I wish I would have attended a few more of these, since I had a lot of fun at the activities I did go to, but there were times when I had gotten into a rhythm that I didn't want to disrupt while working on my homework.

I loved spending time in Great Barrington, the touristy town that was about a forty-minute walk from our dorms. It was a pretty long trek up several intense hills to get there, but the shops and cafés around town made it worth the journey. A few friends and I made it a weekend routine to see movies at the local theater, where we welcomed two hours with A/C. We tried some great food in town, too; one crepe spot was especially memorable.

I was proud of the independence that I adopted while at YWW—I'm very used to going to the gym with a friend or walking somewhere with a group, and I had to adjust to sometimes doing these things on my own to meet my needs. I had many responsibilities thrown at me—workshops, homework, required group readings, laundry—and balancing them was a little

challenging. It was a glimpse into collegiate life that I hadn't gotten before, and I think the experience will be extremely helpful in a few years when I head off to college.

My biggest takeaway from the workshop was a shift in my mindset: focusing on the process rather than the product. So often, I get very caught up in my perfect end goal and forget to enjoy the time I spend actually doing the things I love—in this case, it was writing, but this also translates to reading, drawing, drumming, and sometimes even my schoolwork. I'm a massive perfectionist, so I get frustrated trying to tinker with tiny issues that don't fit into my plan. In my workshop, Irene—and, when we met as a full group, the other instructors—told us to modify our plans and allow “mistakes” to become new routes to explore. This created so many new possibilities, and I found myself investigating topics I'd hardly thought about before. A go-with-the-flow mindset is a great tool; being able to accept change and readjust as needed will help with time management, day-to-day conversation, and so many other aspects of my life.

My time at Simon's Rock was an experience unlike any other I've had. I'm so grateful to have been given the opportunity to attend by the Garwin Family Foundation and the Young Writers' Workshop. I'll take all of the knowledge I acquired through the rest of my life—the writing skills, which apply to so many fields of study, but also communal living experience, interpersonal skills, and a new self-confidence that I unlocked somewhere along the way.