

POETRY SOCIETY OF AMERICA

The John Waldman Writing Project

This exercise should take 45-60 minutes.

The instructor should begin with one sealed envelope for each participating student. Each envelope will contain one poem inside; the first line of this poem will be printed on the outside of the envelope.

The instructor should ask the students to take a minute or two to study the first line on the outside of the envelope — is it short or long, does it contain big words or small, what images does it evoke, who do they imagine speaking it, etc.

Then the instructor should ask the students to inhabit the voice of the first line — to be “inside the mind” of the speaker or “pretend you are the person writing this poem” — and finish writing the poem, keeping the first line.

Afterwards, the instructor should break the students up into small groups of 4 according to the original poems they were given, and ask the students to open up the envelope and read the original poems, as well as their own poems, to each other.

The instructor should then ask each group to talk about the experience — how did the original poem differ from their poem? What images came up, did the voice of the first line sound the same throughout the poem, what surprised them? And they can talk about what ideas they had about their own poems, as well as compare them to each other.

Finally, the instructor should assemble the whole class back together, and ask for volunteers to read each of the original poems. Then, all the students should read their own poems aloud.