

I Do Have My Likes and Dislikes

Nikki Giovanni

I like cashmere scarves and cashmere sweaters and cotton blouses
with button down collars

I like mink muffs when my hands are cold and leather gloves up to
my elbow

I like manicures but I don't like nail polish

I like facials but not to squeeze the black heads out

I like caviar and pecan fried chicken and double decker sandwiches
white bread extra mayo

I really like anchovies on my pizza and quilts on my bed and
eucalyptus soap when I take a long bath

I prefer vacations in St. Vincent or Barbados or Jamaica but I'll take
any good beach I can find

I like ESPN Sports Roundup and homemade vanilla ice cream in a
big mug with chocolate chip cookies

I like bird houses and bird feeders and my coffee in the morning on
the deck where I hear birds singing

And mostly I like the peace of the breezes singing through the trees
and... oh by the way... I really like you

Introducing Poetry with Nikki Giovanni

ALISA MALINOVICH

NIKKI GIOVANNI'S POEM, "I Do Have My Likes and Dislikes" is a wonderful piece to use to kick off a poetry workshop with elementary school children. The poem is clear, accessible, fun to read, and contains at least two elements of poetry worth discussing: detail and surprise. It also introduces children to the notion of personal expression in an easy and non-threatening manner.

Many of the children I've worked with over the years speak English as a second language, or simply have a limited vocabulary. This poem is a good place to start, because it has so many accessible but strong examples of description. "Nikki Giovanni doesn't just say she likes ice cream," I often point out, "she goes into detail about the kind of ice cream she likes, and how she likes to eat it." I ask the students to identify these descriptive details, noting the layered aspect of the description. Giovanni describes the kind of ice

cream she likes to eat, the kind of mug she likes to use, and the kind of cookies she likes to eat with the ice cream. I explain to the children that they too will use detail in their writing—not just saying what they like, but describing their likes and dislikes in ways that are colorful and exciting. We also discuss imagery, as I help the students become aware that Giovanni really helps us paint a picture of her likes and dislikes in our minds because of her powerful descriptions.

I then support the students in an exploration of the repetitive aspect of the poem, and the way that plays into the surprise at the end. Depending on the group, there may be squeals or moans of "ewwww" around the implied romantic feelings of "and... oh by the way... I really like you." I don't let this get in my way—it's simply something to be prepared for. The students are just as ready to notice and point out what makes the last line special.

Finally, it's time to write. I set the guidelines, to begin each line with "I like..." or "I dislike..." but I leave the door open for students to bend the rules if they so desire. It's also important to make it clear that students may not use the exercise as an opportunity to speak in a disparaging way about others. I explain that all of us may have negative feelings about other people at times, but this is not the place to record them.

Alisa Malinovich has facilitated creative writing and arts workshops through a variety of non-profit institutions, including Teachers & Writers Collaborative, Voices UnBroken, BRIC Arts Media Brooklyn, and the Children's Museum of Manhattan. Her poetry often appears in Oxford Magazine (England) and can be found online at The Red River Review. She is also the editor of a collection of poetry and prose entitled Generosity: A Chapbook to Benefit Brooklyn Zen Center and the coauthor of Generations: A Century of Women Speak About Their Lives.

We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings with our poetry.

As they write, I encourage the children to think of new and fresh ways to describe people, places, and things familiar to them. Some are comfortable writing only about their likes, and I don't push them. Many of the children I've worked with have traumatic pasts or live under difficult circumstances, and I always intend to strike a balance between allowing them room for expression, and respecting their boundaries.

I Like Music That I Can Dance To

TINEYA, 3RD GRADE

I like pink silky shirts with black pants and a leather jacket.

I like a beef patty with cheese in the middle of the crust.

I like the color burgundy because it sticks out.

I like a friend but I don't like a friend who lies.

I like vanilla ice cream with butter pecan nuts and marshmallow with hot fudge.

I like music that I can dance to.

I like the sound of the wind when it hits the trees and I like the sound of the rain when it hits the windows.

I like butterflies but I don't like bees.

Dreaming of Florida

NIRVANNA, 3RD GRADE

I like hot chocolate on a cold winter day I like strawberry and vanilla ice cream and I like to ice-skate

I like nail polish my favorite color nail polish is pink and baby blue with a design on it like a flower or a moon with stars or a heart

I dislike rats, roaches and dirty things I dislike bugs

I like music I like to be with my family I would like to take a trip to Florida or a trip to Puerto Rico

I like rice and chicken I like to watch Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel I dislike falling down and getting a bruise and bleeding I dislike people talking behind my back

Rainbow Sprinkles

RYANA, 3RD GRADE

I like chocolate ice cream with rainbow sprinkles on the side.

I like chocolate chip cookies.

I like juice—mango with salt.

I like to ride my bike on summer days.

I like to go to school.

I like to sleep over at my cousin's.

I like rabbits and horses.

And one more example, by Antana. The last line comes as both a surprise and a relief, in that it breaks the pattern of the speaker's negative associations with activity.

Favorite Things and Not Favorite Things

ANTANA, SPECIAL EDUCATION ELEMENTARY

I like nail polish—all kinds of colors.

I like ice cream—every kind.

I like new clothes, and hate to wash the clothes.

I like food, and hate to cook it.

I like to look pretty, and hate having to fix myself up in the morning all the time.

I like to be done with my work, but hate doing it.

I like to swim. 🐬