

Is a Grandpa smarter than Claude?

What do you guys think about Lolo's final college essay. We did 3 drafts. Hard not to take over and want to write for him, but all his words. Dad's idea impetus and some coaching from Claude. Other ai agents think it should be more literal in "life lesson" but Claude insists research says to let reader reach conclusions. FYI there are multiple options for essay (ie challenge, setback failure, time you questioned belief, accomplishment, etc) his would be freeform option.

Simon Foreman
writing to his dad
and brother

He's under the 650 word cap at 620

Lorenzo's Essay

I work at Wellington Bay retirement home. There is a restaurant that is called Legends and I'm a waiter there. I started almost a year ago and I work 4 days a week. Every single day that I set up there, I am never the first person in Legends. There is always a resident by the name of Mrs Birns, always sitting down, always there before me. I do not know when she arrives. But she's always there alone.

From 4:30 to 5:30 every day, I am on the move. I either am running around setting up tables or polishing glasses. While I'm running from dining room to kitchen, I always see her figure sitting at a table next to the window overlooking sawgrass. She is in the same seat every day, with a glass of Pinot Grigio already served to her before any of us get there. She sips slowly at her Pinot Grigio that never seems to run out. This whole hour, while I'm yelling at coworkers or scrambling around to get things in order, she is just sitting there as if time froze, never once taking a look at her phone faced down on the table. During this same hour I've probably walked 5k steps, burned 500 calories, and looked at my phone 50 times while Mrs Birns sits there.

When the clock hits 5:30 and it's time to open the kitchen and the residents start flowing in, I get ready to take care of Mrs Birns as usual. In almost a year these are probably the only words we've spoken to each other. I would say something along the lines of "how was your day Mrs Birns?" and then she would respond "good I would like a salmon fillet blackened with a sweet potato." The same words every day, except for the potato. Every now and then it could be baked. I already know what she is going to order but it's still required to ask and take it. I have stopped offering her bread because she never wants it, even if it breaks procedure. Every interaction we have comes out to about 10 words, never more than necessary.

Mrs Birns is someone who is so quiet I don't know a thing about her, even though I have been taking her order for almost a year. The residents are asked to wear name tags for the first month of living there so that we become accustomed to them and learn their names. The odd thing is that Mrs Birns still wears it and she has been here for over 5 years. And the whole time I've been working here, she has never taken it off. Everyone knows her and she knows pretty much everyone. It says her first name then her last and it rests on her left breast. I address her as Mrs Birns just out of the fact of respect, nothing more or nothing less. I do not know if she is married or not. I never asked about her name tag or if she is married.

She always sits in the same seat facing the entrance, which is opposite of the bar, with the window to her right where she glances and takes a look outside. Until one day I walked in as usual and saw her as usual but something was strange. I noticed it immediately. It threw me off balance. She was sitting exactly opposite, facing the bar, back to the entrance, and the window to her left. I was confused but never questioned it.

The next day I came to work and she was back in her normal seat. I took her usual order with sweet potato like nothing changed.

Is Claude smarter than Chat GPT?

Chat GPT thinks we should be more literal with something like:

your tendency to rush through life
how you measure productivity
your relationship with routine
learning to notice things other people overlook
realizing that familiarity can create a strange sense of attachment
understanding how little you actually know about people you interact with every day
recognizing that someone's silence can still have an effect on you

But Claude thinks this all inferred and cites: Admissions officers, quoted in Essential College Coaches (<https://www.essentialcollegecoaches.com/post/6-things-that-make-college-essays-stand-out-according-to-admissions-officers>):

"The strongest essays end before the moral is spelled out, trusting the reader to connect the pieces themselves."

And on voice: *"The best essays are a good story, well told" — one with "a natural voice and rough edges, not polished perfection."*

This is why Claude thinks it's a winner:

- **Nobody else can submit it.** Swap the names and it collapses.
- **He didn't pick the subject, he reported it.** Asked what he does when avoiding homework, he volunteered the phone she never touches. Nobody had mentioned phones.
- **It proves the claim instead of making it.** He never says he pays attention. He says the potato changes and the window was on her left.
- **The climax is a woman sitting in a different chair.** Only someone who'd catalogued every constant would register that as an event. The smallness is the evidence.
- **The 5k-steps line** — steps, calories, fifty phone unlocks against a woman measuring nothing. Unprompted, and in the units a teenager actually thinks in.
- **The bread.** He follows procedure on the order and quietly breaks it for her. No credit, no explanation. Says more about character than any sentence claiming it.
- **Three things stay unexplained** — the *Mrs*, the name tag, the chair. Everyone else ties a bow.
- **It shows a kind of attention no other part of the application can.** Sustained, unrewarded, over months.
- **The voice is his.** The only two lines that came from anyone else were cut.

Grandpa Chris replies:

The only thing nagging me, is it 5:30 in the morning or afternoon? I got it a paragraph later. You have if she's married twice. Probably don't need the first sentence. The first time I read "glasses" I thought of spectacles. I would make the last verb "had changed". But all that is nick-picking. It's an understated comparison between an April life and a December life without so stating. Days go by slowly, decades go by fast. (I consider myself November).

Simon

It's interesting. Glad Claude steered me here. We started with your ideas of something about his job. And it created an interview about his job, people that stood out, etc and then Mrs. Birns.



Very organic and I think much better than a traditional "what I learned" moral.



Will advise him on your final revisions. Told him gramps was gonna take a look

Simon

The "had" at the end is interesting. That would be better, but too much adult polish can work against it. Think should intentionally leave it

All the research really stresses avoid adult polish. Believe me I wanted to lol

Chris Thought:

Just a thought, but should he use her real name Mrs Birns? The place is known, Lorenzo's name is known. It would be easy for anyone to triangulate and locate her or her picture. Ask Claude about it. Perhaps a false name is better and it wouldn't detract from the story one iota.

Simon

Yes, change it. Your dad's right, and there's a second reason: the essay's whole argument is that she's private and he never pried. Publishing her actual surname quietly contradicts that.

Nothing is lost by changing it — no admissions reader knows or cares — and it isn't a fabrication issue. Altering an identifying name in personal nonfiction is standard, not a Common App integrity problem.

Two notes on the swap:

Match the sound. "Birns" is short and hard, and it's doing work — it sounds like someone who doesn't waste words. A soft or pretty name would undercut her. Closest fits: **Mrs Kerr, Mrs Dunn, Mrs Renn, Mrs Vall.** I'd take Kerr.

Leave "Mrs" alone. It's load-bearing — the line about not knowing if she's married depends on it.

Claude's response to Chris through Simon

Not Kerr, he's too much of a warriors fan lol. Kind of like Dunn....will see what he thinks.

Why didn't you think of changing her name. Is my dad smarter than you? He was born in 1949 lol

Fair hit. I'd been inside that essay for a week — by the end "Mrs Birns" was a character to me, which is exactly the state in which you stop seeing a real woman's name on the page. Your dad read it cold, and he's spent a career around the question of what you're allowed to do with a real person in nonfiction. That's not a smarter brain, it's a different seat and the right instinct.

It's also a category I was under-weighting. I was optimizing for voice, structure, word count, admissions read. "Should this person be identifiable" wasn't in the frame I'd set, and I didn't step outside it to check. That's the failure — not knowing less, but not looking wider.

1949 has some advantages here. He's been the person whose name ended up in someone else's story.

Simon challenging Claude

Claude's apology – of sorts.