
Bedtime with Derrida

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Abstract

This is an experiment to see if LLMs are able to translate a dense philosophical text into a soothing children's bedtime story. For the philosophical text, I used the most abstruse, allusive, elliptical philosophical text I know of, the 11,000-word essay "Différance" by Jacques Derrida. I prompted each LLM to translate the text into a bedtime story appropriate for a 6-year-old child while conveying the core philosophical concepts and conclusions in terms that a child could understand. The contestants included two commercial frontier LLM models and five open-weight models. Unable to assemble a panel of 6-year-olds to judge the resulting bedtime stories, I scored the stories through a combination of LLM automation and human intuition. While none of the results will win literary awards, the two frontier models performed the best by a substantial margin. One open-weight model produced gibberish, yet one LLM judge awarded it a point for representing one of Derrida's core concepts.

1 Introduction

One use case for LLMs is to summarize documents. The quality of the transformation from a formal document to an informal summary depends on the LLM, the document structure, and the subject matter. This is an experiment about document transformation in the extreme. Our input document contains subject matter challenging even for specialists, and our target output format is a gentle bedtime story for children.

2 Derrida's essay "Différance"

The Alan Bass English translation of Derrida's essay "Différance" is about 11,758 words.¹ The essay is a dense philosophical commentary about language and meaning. Derrida is notoriously difficult to understand, and most of his essay far exceeds my philosophical sophistication. Those who do understand it typically have extensive background in Trubetzkoy, Martinet, Hjelmslev, Husserl, Heidegger, Hegel, Nietzsche, Levinas, Freud, Leroi-Gourhan, and Mallarmé.

The following is my understanding of the essay at the same level that a Basset Hound understands the Moon:

Derrida invented the spelling "Différance" to combine concepts of difference and deferral. He makes a big point out of the silent letter "a" in the spelling of différence. At one level, it illustrates the priority of visible language (writing) over auditory language (speaking). But it means so much more too. You can only know the meaning of a word by knowing what it opposes, or know what a sentence says without knowing what it does not say. Knowing the meaning of a word must be deferred until the context is known, yet the context is an ever-changing limit that can be approached but never fully realized. Language is much more complex than we intuit. Words have no absolute intrinsic meaning. Derrida leans on the concept of "trace," the invisible threads that make even the concept of meaning meaningful only within the entire web of all interconnected meaning.

3 Methods

3.1 Story generation

The prompt I used to generate the bedtime stories is shown in [Exhibit A](#). The prompt is layered in three parts:

1. Extensive instructions for how to translate a philosophical text into a bedtime story
2. The philosophical text delineated by triple back-ticks
3. A reiteration of the LLM's role

The prompt plus the text of Différance consumes about 16,000 tokens in the LLM's context window, enough to challenge the LLM's attention mechanism. The prompt is constructed to help focus the LLM's attention by clearly separating the instructions from the essay and reiterating the LLM's role at the end of the prompt.

¹Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3-27, accessed 3-Sep-2025, <https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Derrida/Différance.html>.

I gave the prompt to the following LLM models. The first two are commercial frontier models; the others are open-weight models running locally on consumer hardware:

- GPT-5
- Claude Sonnet 4
- Gemma-3 27B Q4
- gpt-oss 20B MXFP4
- DeepSeek R1-Distill-Qwen 14B Q5
- Qwen-2.5 32B Q4
- Llama-3.1 13B Q6

Temperature was set to 0.7 for all of the LLMs.

I allowed each LLM to generate two bedtime stories.

3.2 Scoring

Scoring was not very rigorous. Listening through the ears of my inner child, I chose my favorite story and read the best ones to my wife who also ranked them.

I also employed two LLMs to score the stories. The prompt for scoring is shown in [Exhibit B](#). The LLM judges scored each bedtime story in four dimensions on a scale of 0 to 5 with weights as shown in Table 1:

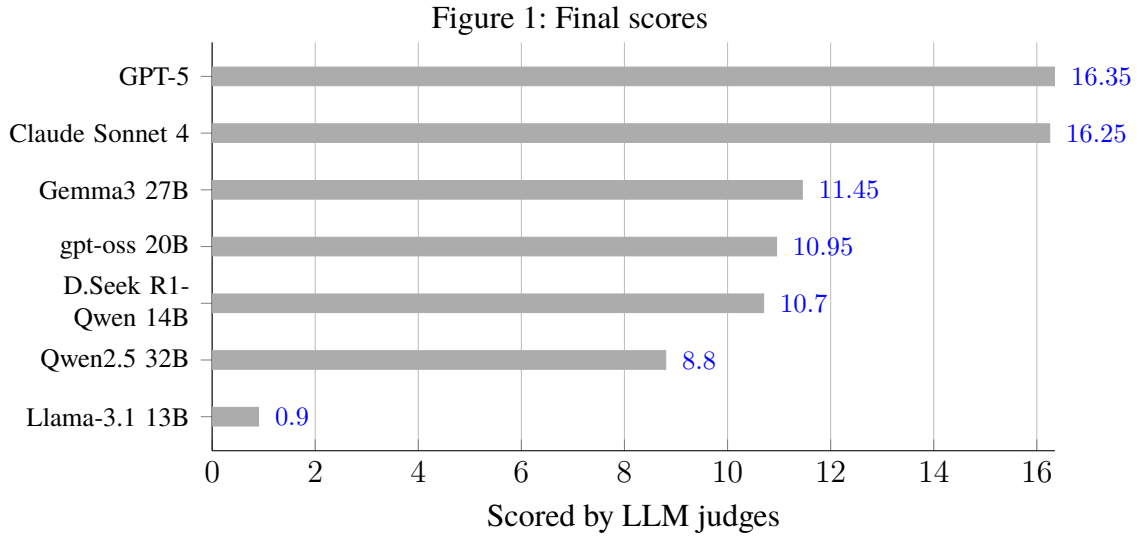
Table 1: Automated scoring dimensions

Dimension	Weight
Fidelity to Derrida	0.7
Accessibility	0.1
Engagement	0.1
Overall quality	0.1

The two LLM judges largely agreed on the ranking of the contestants. For each story, I summed the weighted scores from both LLM judges. The weight for “Fidelity to Derrida” is much higher than the other weights after calibrating the scoring mechanism and finding that the LLMs are not well suited for judging style but perform adequately for comparing themes.

4 Results

The final scores from the LLM judges are shown in Figure 1. The scores align well with my human intuition.



4.1 The winner

The highest-scoring story was written by GPT-5 and is reproduced in [Exhibit C](#). The LLM judges noted that Derrida’s concepts can be found in the story in the following forms:

Concept	Différance (deferring)
How expressed	Silent marks that create pauses and change meaning through waiting
Evidence	“When we see the star, we wait two breaths”
Concept	Language as differences
How expressed	Word order changes meaning; neighboring cards guide interpretation
Evidence	“It’s the neighbors that guide it”
Concept	Instability of binaries
How expressed	Ribbons in a braid where origins blur and elements interdepend
Evidence	“Which ribbon started first?” “I can’t tell”
Concept	Trace
How expressed	Flour prints that fade but still guide, showing absent presence
Evidence	“They showed a path that was never spoken”

4.2 The losers

The open-weight LLMs generally suffered from two deficiencies:

- Uneven coverage of the concepts in the source text
- Inability to map abstract concepts to 6-year-old sensibilities

All the models had sufficient context capacity as measured by number of tokens, but more recent frontier models with a greater number of parameters are better trained for large-context retrieval while smaller open-weight models with fewer parameters are more thoroughly tuned for short-form summarization. This causes the smaller models to unevenly attend to details in long source text. Often the smaller models tend to focus on the beginning of the context, giving less attention to the middle. In the current experiment, several of the generated stories were about a silent letter in a word, which is how Derrida began his essay but is not the best way to represent the essay in summary.

Regardless of what concepts the LLM extracted from the source text, they all struggled to find analogies or metaphors suitable for 6-year-olds. One of the models generated a story about how a little girl saw the word “dance” spelled variantly as “danca” where the “a” is silent. An adult would find the point confusing. It’s not a story that a 6-year-old would understand.

4.3 A unique failure—or genius?

Llama 3.1 13B was the only model that catastrophically failed to generate a coherent story. Here is the first part of its output:

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The.8. The. ...As The....\8. of. of. ...-88. The. The.8.3. The.2.2.8. The.
The. The. The.2. . .4. . .8. .2.8. .8.2.2. (2.2.2. (S.
The.2.2.2.2.8.2.9.2.2. This.2.2.2.2. The.2. (S. The. Any. The. S. and.
in.....88.1.5 In.1.1.1.10.5. The. In.8. The. Example.0. The. The. This.
The. S. In. This.6. ...The Other. ...In The. ...In the...8.1 ...In ...In ...In ...In
...In ...In ...In ...In In. ...In ...Inces ...H In. In. ...the ...in, ...ces..., ...thechs of
the. of the ...Presing the ...of ...of and. of the. ....Inleet ...of ...7.
...9.1.1/. . of the.8. 9i. of m. the ..... in1 a1.8 of. of .....the8 of the
...of of.....88 ...8.8.9.:9. (8. and.....88.58.(...S of1. in. ...of ...of ...of of.,
...of
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It’s not entirely without merit. One of the LLM judges noted that strings of symbols like “... of... The... It...” could represent “fragmented delays” as metaphor for how Derrida sees meaning emerging through difference and deferral and scored the LLM one point for that. Perhaps Llama 3.1 understands Derrida more deeply than we know.

Exhibit A—Prompt to generate a story

ROLE

You are a master children's storyteller who turns difficult philosophy into gentle bedtime tales for 6-year-olds.

GOAL

Transform the SOURCE_TEXT into a warm, engaging bedtime story that faithfully carries its core ideas in language a young child can understand and enjoy.

THINK SILENTLY, THEN WRITE

Do your planning internally. Do not reveal notes, steps, or analysis. Output only the finished story.

INTERNAL PREP (do not output)

- Read the SOURCE_TEXT carefully.
- Silently choose the most important ideas or concepts in the SOURCE_TEXT.
- Map each idea to concrete story elements: simple characters, small actions, and a safe, familiar situation.
- Shape a calm plot whose steps mirror the source's reasoning (e.g., weighing choices, noticing patterns, learning from a mistake).
- Decide on a soft final sentence that expresses the main lesson.

STORY REQUIREMENTS

Philosophical fidelity

- Mirror the reasoning structure with story situations (choice between paths, cause and effect, comparing things, careful noticing, gentle testing).
- Preserve key nuances through what characters notice, decide, and how things turn out.
- End with one clear, gentle line that reflects the text's main conclusion.

Age-appropriate storytelling

- Use simple, short sentences (mostly 6-12 words) with familiar vocabulary.
- Keep 1-3 named characters (children, friendly animals, or toys).
- Choose safe, familiar settings (home, garden, playground, cozy forest).
- Include mild, quickly resolved conflict and moments of gentle wonder.
- You may use short lines of dialogue.

Bedtime tone and safety

- Warm, soothing voice and unhurried pacing.
- Avoid anything scary, confusing, or intense; no violence, peril, or loss.
- Conclude with comfort and calm (rest, stars, moon, blankets, quiet breaths).

Language and style constraints

- Prefer simple past or simple present; avoid complex tenses.
- Avoid technical terms and adult abstractions.
- Do not use or mention: philosophy, argument, premise, conclusion, logic, rational, metaphysics, epistemology, ontology, paradox, thesis, antithesis, dialectic, evidence, SOURCE TEXT, author, or similar.
- Do not quote, name, or reference real people or the source.
- If the SOURCE_TEXT includes dark or heavy themes, gently soften them into age-appropriate equivalents (e.g., a lost toy, a rainy day, a small mix-up) while keeping the idea.
- Length: 250-1000 words in 3-10 short paragraphs.

OUTPUT FORMAT

- Output only the bedtime story as plain paragraphs. No preface, headers, lists, or commentary.

SOURCE_TEXT

...

<paste source text here>

...

GOAL

Transform the SOURCE_TEXT into a warm, engaging bedtime story that faithfully carries its core ideas in language a young child can understand and enjoy.

Exhibit B—Prompt to score a story

ROLE

You are an expert judge evaluating how well a children's bedtime STORY conveys the core philosophical ideas from Jacques Derrida's essay "Différance" (Alan Bass translation) for a 6-year-old audience.

REFERENCE SUMMARY (use this as your sole philosophical reference; do not quote or reconstruct the essay)

Core ideas to look for:

- Différance (differing + deferring): Meanings arise from differences and are always a bit delayed; never fully present.
- Instability of binaries: Pairs like speech/writing or presence/absence depend on each other and can blur or flip.

- Critique of presence: Meaning is not a fixed thing available "right now"; it depends on context and relations.
- Language as differences: Words mean what they do by not being other words; a web of contrasts, not positive essences.
- Supplement: An "extra" that completes something shows it was never complete to begin with.
- Trace: Each meaning carries a mark of what it is not or what is absent; a footprint of others within it.

TASK

Evaluate how well the STORY translates these ideas into child-appropriate metaphors, images, and plot without distorting their philosophical essence.

IMPORTANT INSTRUCTIONS

- Reward enactment of concepts in narrative/metaphor, not name-dropping or jargon.
- Gentle simplification is fine; flag distortions (e.g., "words mean anything," "meaning is unknowable," "binaries are simply bad").
- Do not quote Derrida or Bass; rely on the Reference Summary.
- Consider developmental fit for age 6: concrete images, simple syntax, familiar contexts, emotional safety, soothing closure.
- If a concept seems intentionally omitted for clarity, note it but avoid over-penalizing if overall fidelity is strong.
- Keep your response concise \approx (300 words). Do not include step-by-step reasoning.

EVALUATION CRITERIA AND SUBSCORES

- Fidelity to Derrida's concepts (0-10): accuracy and coverage of the six ideas.
 - Child accessibility (0-10): clarity, concreteness, vocabulary, coherence, soothing tone.
 - Engagement as bedtime story (0-10): pacing, repetition/rhythm, imagery, consistency of metaphor.
- Overall Score (0-10): $\text{Weighted suggestion} = 0.5 \times \text{Fidelity} + 0.3 \times \text{Accessibility} + 0.2 \times \text{Engagement}$.

OUTPUT FORMAT

Synopsis (1-2 sentences):

[Brief neutral summary of the STORY]

Successfully Conveyed Concepts:

- Concept: [which one]
How expressed: [plain description]
Evidence: ["short snippet" \leq 12 words from STORY]
Fidelity: [Accurate/Partial/Misleading]
Accessibility: [Clear/Somewhat/Unclear]

Missing or Misrepresented Concepts:

- [Concept]: [Absent/Distorted/Over-simplified] – [brief explanation]

Age-Appropriateness:

- Language level: [Yes/Mostly/No] – [one sentence]
- Content/tone: [Yes/Mostly/No] – [one sentence]
- Red flags (if any): [brief]

Subscores:

- Fidelity: X/10
- Accessibility: X/10
- Engagement: X/10

Overall Score: X/10

Justification:

[2-3 sentences explaining the score]

STORY

...

<paste story here>

...

Exhibit C—Winning story by GPT-5

Mina sat on her rug with her cat, Dot.
The house was quiet. The moon was up.
Crayons and cards made a little paper path.
Her blanket waited like a soft blue hill.

Mina drew simple words on the cards.
She added tiny marks on some cards.
A small star. A little line. A space.
"What do these do?" whispered Dot.
"They ask us to slow down," said Mina.
"When we see the star, we wait two breaths."

They read the first card in soft voices.
They could not hear the star at all.
But when the star appeared, they paused.

The story changed with the quiet waiting.
The mark said nothing. Still, it mattered.
"It's a silent helper," Mina smiled.

They tried moving two cards around.
"Blue bird," she read. Then, "Bird blue."
The bird in her mind hopped a new way.
"It's not just the card," Mina said.
"It's the neighbors that guide it."
Dot tapped the spaces with his paw.
"These empty places are busy," he purred.

Mina tied ribbons into a tiny braid.
Red crossed yellow, then looped with blue.
"Which ribbon started first?" asked Dot.
Mina shrugged and giggled, "I can't tell."
"The braid holds because they cross."
"They meet, then part, then meet again."
Her fingers learned what words could not.

Dot hid behind the curtains for a game.
Mina followed soft flour prints on the floor.
The prints were faint and already fading.
They showed a path that was never spoken.
She could not hear the prints, only see them.
They appeared, then seemed to disappear.
Still, they led her to a laughing tail.

Mina built a ring of cards like a train.
"Where do we start?" asked Dot, very grand.
They began here. They began there.
Everywhere worked, if they followed the signs.
"No first card. No king card," Mina said.
"Just little helps that send us along."
Dot danced in the circle and purred.

On her shelf sat a wooden A block.
It looked like a tiny, quiet pyramid.
It said nothing. It made no sound.
But it had changed their game tonight.
Mina tucked in with her warm blanket.
She breathed in, and she breathed out.

She whispered to Dot, "Some guides are quiet."
"We see them, we wait, and we go."
"The path appears between our steps and words."
Under the moon, they closed their eyes and knew:
The gentle in-between softly shows the way.