



AMERICAN
ORTHOPAEDIC
ASSOCIATION

Digital Signature: AI's Growing Role in Producing Letters of Recommendation Will Have an Impact on Academic Medicine

Originally published in *AOA This Week* Member Newsletter, August 30, 2025

By Patrick Morgan, MD, FAOA - University of Minnesota



As artificial intelligence increasingly permeates academic medicine, we find ourselves confronting an uncomfortable reality: the letter of recommendation may be evolving in ways that fundamentally challenge our ability to assess candidates. The same technology helping us finish text messages or draft quick emails is now being employed to craft some of the most important documents we have when evaluating the next generation of orthopaedic surgeons.

Department chairs, fellowship directors, and senior faculty are frequently overwhelmed with administrative responsibilities while managing clinical loads, research obligations, and educational duties. The pressure to produce timely, well-crafted letters has never been greater. But the integration of AI into recommendation writing presents a double-edged sword—these tools can help busy clinicians with tightening time constraints, but they also introduce a fundamental problem into our evaluation process.

The evaluation process has already seen significant change. From pass/fail grading for classroom coursework to the more recent pass-fail reporting for USMLE Step 1, there is little preclinical data to assess. Pass-fail grading has also become more common for clinical clerkships. In this environment, the letter of recommendation takes on an outsized role—one less dependent on the student's socioeconomic background than research publications.

Yet, the time available to produce quality letters is only decreasing, increasing the appeal of using AI. The ease at which AI can produce a letter of support, however, is not necessarily an indication of quality. As Jonathan P. Braman, MD, FAOA, Department Chair at Henry Ford Health, aptly observes: "Lazy writing is lazy writing. To me, it doesn't matter if it is AI or just slipshod effort. If you are going to use AI to write the letter, I am going to hold it against you and, unfortunately, probably against the student."

We have all developed a sophisticated ability to read between the lines of recommendation letters, parsing subtle cues that often reveal a writer's true assessment. The difference between "excellent" and "outstanding," the presence or absence of specific anecdotes, the enthusiasm conveyed through word choice, the ability to draw on years of supervision experience to provide context for where an applicant's abilities rank — these nuances have historically been seen as important insights into a candidate's capabilities and potential. AI-generated letters seem to lack this insider's register, this hallway vocabulary that signals we're listening to a peer. These deficiencies may ultimately serve to undermine the reader's

trust in letters of support (Was this written by a bot?) and when that happens the diminishment of letters' role in the process will not be far behind.

That would be a shame. For most of our applicants, the personal letter of support is as close as the evaluator will get to working with them as an extern. Our path forward therefore requires acknowledgment of this inevitable trend while simultaneously developing new strategies for evaluation. The American Orthopaedic Association has already put into place one such strategy, the Electronic Standardized Letter of Recommendation (eSLOR) system, which maps questions to the six ACGME core competencies and provides numerical ratings to combat grade inflation. This standardized approach attempts to preserve meaningful differentiation between candidates while reducing the burden on letter writers. However, even this structured solution will be undermined if AI begins generating standardized responses that lack genuine assessment.

At the very least, AI assistance in letter writing is likely here to stay; it's too easy, too fast, too cheap to not be adopted. One can even imagine a time when the technology improves to the point where the reader will need to work to detect the presence of an AI author. But one can just as easily imagine a faculty member, wanting to advocate particularly strongly for a student, adding a new and telling phrase: I recommend this student so strongly, I wrote this letter myself.