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Learning to Fly

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If you're an airplane watcher, someone who sits near the runway at airports and ogles every airplane parked, taxiing, taking off or landing, congratulations! You have just met the first criterion for earning a pilot's license: acute aviation obsession.

You toy with the notion of learning to fly. You might have mixed but very normal emotions: It's enticing, a little scary, impractical, expensive, fun, foolish, childish, and unconventional.

Or you know you want to fly. Well, aviation needs you! Read on: It will help you start and succeed in one of the most dynamic forms of human activity ever conceived.

Why people learn to fly

When instructors ask their students why they want to learn to fly, the most common answer is "It's something I always wanted to do." There is no explaining it, nor is there any need to.

Do you seek a confidence-building challenge? I was one such. Flying changed my life, and it can revolutionize yours, too.

Possibly you have poetry in your soul. It's beautiful to be in the air and to see the world in a new way. If you have never flown through a series of rainbows, I can tell you it's one of life's more exquisite experiences.

Perchance you see the airplane as a magic carpet that can take you places unreachable by earthbound mortals. Maybe you are drawn by the technology in airplanes these days. Or perhaps someone you know flies and you want to help them or fly as copilot.

A few of you might want to face your fear of flying. That's very gutsy and you need not earn a license if this is your goal instead.

The right time to learn

Have your personal life in order so you can concentrate on an intensive six-to-nine-month project. A flight requires you, money, your instructor, the airplane and decent weather. Flight schools help put all the pieces in place, even financing.

Today a private pilot certificate costs around \$7,000 all found. Think of it as a lifetime investment in yourself. Money comes and goes, but your skills last a lifetime.

Start without spending a lot of money

First, find a convenient airport. There are more than 5,000 general aviation airports in the continental U.S., and many have flight schools. Talk with every flight school in range. It does not matter whether the airport has a control tower or not.

Start inexpensively by taking an instructor-led ground school class at a school you like. It costs only a few hundred dollars and gives you a chance to see if you enjoy it and can handle the material. Take the class at an airport so you can be around aviation people and airplanes. If you like it, the training counts toward your written test. If you don't, you're out without having spent a lot of money.

Take a for-real introductory lesson with an instructor. This will put you in the left seat. Pay for a full hour at any school that appeals to you. Assess your comfort level with all of it.

Find a mentor. A mentor is a pilot (not necessarily an instructor) who can answer questions as to how best to accomplish your training, and who can provide moral support. Mentors are volunteers and if you have one the odds of you earning your license triple. A pilot you know can be your mentor, or a flight school may be able to hook you up with one. Also, consult the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association's Web page.

Deciding if flying is for you

If you are meticulous, detail-oriented and conscientious, and dislike even small errors, that's a sign of the "right stuff." If you are in a technical profession or have technical training, the discipline you have gained will be helpful.

Physically, people with good eye-hand coordination, such as expert drivers and people with lots of video game experience, do well. You must not have any medically disqualifying conditions such as diabetes or a mental illness.

Being a perfectionist helps. Good pilots work toward perfection on every flight. They do not excuse anything less. Being a pilot commits you to a lifetime of learning. If this sounds like you, that's great.

In contrast, some people are annoyed by details. "The devil is in the details," the saying goes, and nowhere is this more true than in aviation. Similarly, some dislike exacting rituals such as preparing for a flight, including weather checking, flight planning, aircraft preflight inspection and checklists. If you just want to "kick the tires and light the fires," aviation is not for you.

Problems with authority are a red flag. The FAA is the 800-pound gorilla of aviation. Regulations exist for everyone's safety. Pilots thrive in the regulatory cocoon, and take pride in doing things safely and legally. If you find rules oppressive, don't take up flying.

Lastly, honesty and integrity are greatly valued. Ego is another red flag and gets people hurt, or worse.

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