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Learning to Fly: Choosing a Flight School

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When learning to fly, choosing the right flight school for your own particular needs is very important. Here is some practical advice about choosing a flight school.

Haste makes waste

Be systematic and don't rush. Conduct research until you understand exactly who is offering what. Visit every nearby school, talk to the chief or assistant chief instructor and, especially, chat with students offline. Talk with your mentor and any pilot you know. Soon you will learn what's important to you and the breadth of offerings available. Training full-time is best, but the school should know how often you can fly.

Types of schools

Pilot training is conducted under either Part 61 or Part 141 of the FAA's rules. Part 61 is the default choice because record-keeping is simpler and there is more flexibility in the order in which your training is conducted. Students must fly under Part 141 if their training is Veterans Administration-provided or if they are international students. Professional pilot trainees may also prefer Part 141.

Periodic "stage checks" are required under Part 141 but are optional under Part 61. Ask if the school does checks for Part 61 students. It can buttress your confidence to know that another pilot has checked your skills to date and finds them satisfactory.

Many schools offer both formats, but regardless you will learn and be tested on the same material. Good records are essential and you should ask how the school accomplishes this, including long-term record retention.

Ask management to see the syllabus under which you will train. It will spell out exactly what skills you will master and the order in which you will learn them.

Your goals

You should have some idea what you want to do with your license: whether you plan to buy an airplane or just rent; if you mean to use the airplane for travel, sightseeing or aerobatics; and if you intend your private pilot's license as your first step toward a flying career. Make sure the school can help you meet your objective, whatever that may be. Explain this to every school you visit.

For instance, if your goal is a college degree in aviation, then you will prefer to attend a community college with a Part 141 aviation program and then transfer to a four-year institution, or just attend a four-year Part 141 aviation school.

Facilities

Ground facilities such as classrooms, flight planning areas, training cubicles, simulators, a library, adequate computers and neatness all count heavily. The place should look like a school, not like an afterthought or an adjunct to another business.

Aircraft choices range from two-seat, high-wing Cessna 150s and 152s to newer-generation airplanes such as the low-wing Diamond DA-20. Four-seaters include high-wing Cessna 172s and low-wing Piper Warriors and Archers.

Regardless, the airplanes you might fly should be neat, clean, with at least one communications radio, one VOR navigation radio, an altitude-reporting ('Mode C') radar transponder and an intercom. They must make you feel comfortable and safe. Duct tape anywhere on the airplane is cause to walk away.

Try to inspect every airplane you might fly during training. Find out who performs their maintenance and if they are on the airport.

Look at the airplane's flight schedules. There should be some blank space in there for you.

Choosing the all-important instructor

Your choice of instructor is critical. Flight schools are very busy and there is a severe shortage of instructors. One instructor can train about five full-time students at once and perhaps twice that many for part-time students.

Find out the people who management recommends to you as instructors. Meet with one or more, and fly with one(s) you like. Ask management how to go about changing instructors if it doesn't work (although it usually does).

Many young instructors are looking to build time in order to join an airline. For some, instructing is a means to an end, and you are simply the vehicle to take them somewhere else. That said, most do good training, but you should ask any prospective instructor about their long-term plans and any alternate occupation such as flying charters that might interfere with your training.

Some schools bind instructors with a six-month or one-year contract. Ask each school about how they will provide you with continuity of training.

Ask the instructor about their experience in training private pilots, and how many they have recommended for flight tests and have passed the first time in the last six months. If you plan to pursue an instrument rating, ask if they are also an instrument instructor. You may be able to stay with them through that rating as well.

"Chemistry" with an instructor is tough to gauge across a table. You don't want Attila the Hun, but you don't want an indifferent wimp either. You want a coach — someone who is situationally

very aware, articulate and analytical enough to explain to you what you are doing right and wrong, a patient perfectionist who demands proper performance. You want a team player who will take delight in every skill you master.

Screamers are non-starters, as are arrogant, egoistic puffballs who think they are gifts to aviation and that you are somehow a lesser mortal. These types are, fortunately, greatly in the minority.

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