



The Best of *Flight Training Magazine*

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10 Things Every Student Needs

Help along the road to your pilot certificate

By Dale Smith

Nobody can argue that learning to fly is hard work. But it seems to be easier for some students than others. What do they have that the others don't? To find out, we talked with some leading training experts and assembled a list of things that every student pilot needs to make a training program as successful and enjoyable as possible.

1. Organization

"Organization is absolutely key to a successful training experience," said Eric Radtke, president of Sporty's Academy in Batavia, Ohio. "A student has to know where they can find the information they need--whether it's in the cockpit or finding specific reference or subject matter in a book."

To help with that organization, Radtke suggests having your own copy of the pilot's operating handbook (POH) for every aircraft you fly. Because you own it, you're free to highlight sections, bend pages, or make notes in the margins--whatever makes it easier for you to use. "Students should know Section II, Limitations, by heart," he said. "Students also need a copy of the aircraft's checklist to learn efficient cockpit flows and procedures. There's so much you can do to help your training when you are not in the airplane."

Some students find it helpful to make blown-up copies of the cruise, takeoff, and landing performance charts, as well as the weight and balance graphs from your airplane's POH. You'll have extras you can write on when you're doing your preflight planning, and enlarging them makes them easier for you and your instructor to read.

2. Understand the cost

While it's certainly a major consideration, the cost of learning to fly is not just the amount of money you will spend. To make your training successful, it's important that you budget the time you'll need each week for flight lessons and homework. It takes about three hours to have a good one-hour lesson. And that doesn't include the time to drive to and from the airport.

Needing all that time away from family or work can lead to problems, especially when you want to take more than one lesson a week, which leads us to the next thing every student needs.

3. Support from family and friends

The more support you have from your family, whether it's from your parents or your wife and children, the more successful you are going to be. They are sacrificing time and money to help you achieve your dream, but their excitement will go a long way in helping you get over the training obstacles every student faces.

"I have a student whose mother drives him to the airport," said Jonathan J. Greenway, chief flight instructor for the AOPA Air Safety Foundation in Frederick, Maryland. "One evening, I asked her if she wanted to ride in the back of my 172. She had never been in a small airplane with him at the controls. She called me the next day to thank me and say she saw her son in a whole new light.

"Until then she had never realized what her 16-year-old son was talking about," he said. "It gave her a new respect for what he was doing."

4. A mentor

A great complement to family support is a mentor. "Students need a direction and continual reinforcement in that direction--that's what a mentor does," said Mike Gaffney, president of Skyline Aeronautics just outside of St. Louis, Missouri. "They need someone to model themselves after. Without a mentor, it's easy to get off track and lose their way."

"It's not for flight training, but just common guidance and sharing overall experiences because the mentor has done it for a while," Greenway said. "Most of my students have mentors and I love it--I know they're going to make it through. They want to be like their mentor."

5. Dedicated, professional instructor

Especially if you are lucky enough to have found one who is not just building time until the airlines come calling. If that doesn't sound like your current instructor, Gaffney suggests you contact the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI) to find a master instructor in your area.

"You'll find a great instructor and a mentor," he said. "Don't settle for whomever your flight school sticks you with. You do have a choice." You can also search for a flight instructor using *AOPA Flight Training Online's* database.

6. Know compass reciprocals

"That sounds strange but I can't tell you how much confusion I've seen, from primary students all the way up through ATPs, from someone who doesn't understand that Runway 16 is the same piece of concrete as Runway 34," Greenway said.

Sure, you can look down at your heading indicator, but what if you're in the pattern, looking for traffic, and the tower assigns you a different runway? Knowing that Runway 2 is the reciprocal of Runway 20

can be very handy. "That's footwork the student can come equipped with so the instructor won't have to spend extra time teaching it," Greenway said.

7. Know how to use a sectional

Don't just know what all the little colored lines and shaded areas mean, but learn how to really use a chart to your advantage. "Students don't like to mess up their charts. They want to keep them for the full six months," Greenway said. "I like to see them mark [sectionals] up. Draw lines and write things on them. You know how unwieldy a chart is in the cockpit. I cut them up and piece them together to make it work for me.

"Don't be afraid to spend another \$8.60 for a new chart if you need to use up the one you have," he added. Speaking of charts, another good idea is to subscribe to a chart service that will automatically send you new charts for your area. There's nothing worse than showing up for your checkride without current sectional charts.

8. Enthusiasm

"The one thing that every student really needs is enthusiasm--that is key and I think the only real key component to anyone's success," Radtke said. "With enthusiasm comes everything else. With it you gain the support of others--you will find ways to make it all work."

"It's a big part of the instructor's responsibility," he said. "At the end of each lesson you need to talk about the big picture. You have to understand what you are doing and where each lesson fits into where you are and where your training is going."

9. Have fun

A big part of keeping that enthusiasm you felt your first hour alive well into your sixtieth hour is to have fun. Celebrate each accomplishment for what it really is. Never lose sight of the fact that you are doing something that very few people will ever experience--both the good and bad.

"It's hard work, but if it's not fun, there's probably something that's not quite right," Radtke said.

"Celebrate each moment. Cut the shirttails [after you solo]. Take pictures. Take a lesson off and get your instructor to fly to another airport just for lunch or something."

10. Gadgets--lots of gadgets

From the first time they say, "I want to fly," it seems like pilots can't begin a sentence without the words, "I want."

Radtke, Gaffney, and Greenway all had ideas of what gadgets every student pilot needs to have. Here's a sampling of their favorites:

- Quality logbook--besides being the place you will record the details of each flight, your logbook is something you're going to have for a long, long time. Buy a good one.
- Flight bag--helps you stay organized in the cockpit and on the ground. Besides, if you don't have one, how will anyone know you're a pilot?
- Headset--probably the most personal of all your purchases. Our experts suggest you start with a model that's reliable and comfortable for you. Save the expense of the high-end unit for a graduation present. Ask other pilots if you can try on their headsets to see which one feels best to you.
- E6B--most folks prefer the speed and accuracy of an electronic flight computer. (Just don't forget to take extra batteries with you.) Of course, there's always the good old manual flight computer, often called the Wiz Wheel.
- Handheld VHF nav/com--this is a great backup for student pilots. You have enough to think about without worrying about a radio failure. And it can help with your aviation education--on the ground, use it to monitor the common traffic advisory frequency or tower frequency of your airport to become more familiar with aviation phrases and terms.
- LED flashlight with changeable colored lenses--a real nice-to-have item, both when you're on the ground and in the air. There are even a few nice models that don't need batteries.

Want to know more?

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