

What a Student Pilot Should Know

Focus on your goal

By Dr. Heather Monthie

When people find out that I know a little bit about aviation, I am normally asked a couple of questions and the conversation is just about always the same. The information forthcoming may be beneficial to those out there who are considering taking the leap and starting flying lessons!

Flight Training Expenses

Probably the question I am asked the most is “how much does it cost to learn how to fly?” No, it’s certainly not a cheap hobby, but if you plan for some of the expenses you’re better prepared for the cash you’ll need to come up with down the road. My response to this question is usually an explanation that the cost is about the same as buying a decent used car. Of course, there are the upfront costs that people are normally aware of: the cost of the plane and the cost of the instructor. I always suggest having about half of what it’s going to cost you in the bank so that you can fly more regularly. Trying to come up with the money as you go will often put a damper on the frequency of which you can fly. And *always* keep the money in your own bank account. Don’t pay for flight training up front. It happens all too often; flight schools close, instructors bail, etc.

Then there’s what I like to call the “hidden costs” of learning to fly. The things that people aren’t usually aware of before chasing the dream of becoming a pilot. Invest in some good equipment. Some items are probably more necessary than others, such as headsets, a nice flight bag, flight planning software, cool looking aviator sunglasses, fuel testers, and more. Some of these items can be expensive, so it’s important to know right away that you’ll probably enjoy spending some money on these kinds of things!

Flight Training Takes Time

Think of it like a part time job. The second most popular question I am asked about what it takes to learn how to fly is how long it takes. This is a harder question to answer since there are so many variables to consider. You need to take into consideration all the other responsibilities you have going on. Do you have time to take on a part time job? The amount of time you’ll need to dedicate to learning is like having a part-time job. If you’re working 60 hours a week and have an hour commute every day, it’s probably going to take you longer than someone who can devote a couple of hours a day to learning.

When I was first learning how to fly, it took me about four months from first flight to checkride. I was 19 years old, was working part-time, didn’t have a mortgage or other major life responsibilities yet. I could dedicate a couple of hours a week to flying and a couple of hours a day were dedicated to ground school and studying. Fast forward to today – I have a career, a commute, I’m a competitive athlete, and have a family with



whom I like to spend time. This means I need to divide my time between work, training in the gym, family, and day-to-day responsibilities. Now if I add something like learning to fly into that mix, time management becomes so important. Maybe I can’t spend 2-3 hours a day studying like I could when I was 19, but I could listen to some great audiobooks during my commute to help with studying. You’ve just got to take all the responsibilities in your life into consideration and move those pieces around a bit to add in flight training. You might even conclude that right now is not the best time, but maybe next summer will be.

It’s Not Just about Flying the Airplane

A couple of weeks ago, I was attending a conference in another city. My Uber driver was telling me about his father-in-law who takes him flying and lets him fly the plane. He lets him take off and fly, but he doesn’t let him land. He told me that he could get his certificate any time. All he needed to do was take the test. Throughout that conversation, I realized he didn’t understand how much more there is to being a good pilot than just knowing how to fly the plane. You will need to know regulations, aerodynamics, aircraft systems, flight planning and navigation, calculating measurements such as fuel use, takeoff distance, and more. Sure, you may know how to fly the plane very well, but if you don’t understand the context of why and how you’re flying the plane then you’re just not ready yet. Which brings me to my next point.

Don’t Wait to Start Ground School

Some of you reading this may be educators as well. You’re probably aware that there’s this natural tendency for many people to want to just jump right into something and get their hands dirty. In my professional role as an educator, I see students learning technical skills who want to get in and write code or design information systems without first having a solid foundation. Yes, it helps with motivation to do these activities right away but there does come a point where you need to start solidifying foundational knowledge.

Don’t wait until you’re well past your first solo to start ground school. A lot of the knowledge areas that you’ll learn in ground school will apply to your actual flight training. It helps to put a lot of sometimes difficult topics into context. A lot of flight schools will offer a ground school in a classroom setting. This is a great idea for anyone who needs the structure of a classroom, such as regular schedule, structured lessons, learning in a group environment, and ability to interact with others who are also learning the same things. Some prefer the self-paced courses and others may prefer one-on-one ground lessons with an instructor. Regardless of enrolling in an official ground



school, it's important to understand that your flight instructor, who is providing the actual flight lessons, is also required to give you formal ground instruction as well. Many people choose to supplement this with additional ground instruction in the formats I described above.

Make Sure Your Spouse is Onboard

I am not a marriage expert, but it seems to me that taking on a new endeavor is a lot easier when you have the support of your spouse. Some people, myself included, may have started flying before meeting their spouse. Others are bitten by the flying bug after meeting their spouse. Learning to fly takes a lot of time and money. Your spouse may not like the amount of time you're spending at the airport.



Adding flying lessons into your life may not align with some of your financial goals you have as a couple. This past summer in Oshkosh, I spoke to someone who turned down a student once he found out the student was putting all his flying expenses on his credit card and that it was creating tension in his marriage. This instructor felt as though he couldn't be a part of that stress. I think we've all heard about spouses who aren't supportive of flying but maybe sometimes it's just rising credit card balances that are creating the tension.

Take Care of Your Stuff!

Your stuff is expensive. Take care of it and it will last you a long time. This goes for more than just flying obviously! I've seen so many airplanes sitting outside, completely run down and seemingly abandoned on a ramp. Pay attention to how you store your headsets so cables last longer. Pay attention to the little details on your airplane. Failure to do so can make those little details into a big deal someday.



Stay Grounded

You've probably heard this joke: How do you know if there's a pilot in the room? He/She will tell you!

Of course, we all love to talk about flying when we are not flying. But this is not a hobby where you want to let your ego drive your decisions. A little humility goes a long way in aviation. You are always learning and can learn something from every aviator you meet, regardless of experience. Staying humble will help keep you out of dangerous situations. Keeping an open mind with everyone you meet will open some great opportunities for you!



Keep a Growth Mindset

As an educator, I am always keeping an eye on whether someone has a fixed or growth mindset in certain situations, myself included. A fixed mindset is the thought that you can't change how smart you are. Having thoughts like "maybe I am just not smart enough to do this" or "I'm not good at math" are going to hold you back when learning to fly. Of course, we all have days



where we feel like we suck at life. Have your five-minute pity party and move on! A growth mindset is the belief that failure is your chance to learn. Sometimes just having a bit more confidence in your skills makes it easier to have a growth mindset. A study done with Aviation Technology students at Purdue University found that there was a small change in students having less of a fixed mindset by their senior years. Perhaps having a bit more experience and confidence can help shift away from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.

Being prepared for obstacles is part of successful flight training. Things will happen and keeping these things in mind prior to starting will help keep you focused on your end goal! I hope that some of these points clear up questions you may have prior to learning to fly. Maybe you'll even want to share this with someone you know who is on the fence about starting their flight training.



10 Growth Mindset Statements

What can I say to myself?

Instead of:

- I'm not good at this...
- I'm awesome at this...
- I give up...
- This is too hard...
- I can't make this any better...
- I just can't do math...
- I made a mistake...
- She's so smart, I'll never be that smart...
- It's good enough...
- Plan "A" didn't work...

Try thinking:

- What am I missing?
- I'm on the right track.
- I'll use some of the strategies I've learned.
- This may take some time and effort.
- I can always improve so I'll keep trying.
- I'm going to train my brain in Math.
- Mistakes help me to learn better.
- I'm going to figure out how she does it.
- Is it really my best work?
- Good thing the alphabet has 25 more letters.