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# Don't Cower *from the* Tower

In most areas of life, first impressions make a lasting impression. Certainly that holds true for aviation.

In fact, the “law of primacy” is one of the early lessons taught to fledgling flight instructors in the FAA’s fundamentals of instruction curriculum. That’s the formal way of saying that our initial experiences

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have a powerful influence in forming our lasting view on a given subject or experience. In my admittedly unscientific study, it appears that a pilot’s initial operating environment influences his or her long-term view of towered and non-towered airports.

## Stop the Madness!

I am a case in point. Most of my primary training was done at a towered airport, which instilled confidence and comfort in talking on the radio with controllers. I remember and acknowledge that it took some time to build up the skills to fly and talk at the same time without stumbling over either task, but it was the only world I knew and I gradually became proficient.

Eventually, I had to leave the familiar comfort of my towered home field for other airports. My first few trips to non-towered (or “uncontrolled,” as we called them at the time) airports were largely uneventful due to light traffic in the area. But then came the solo flight that was to provide a rude awakening. At a point around 10 miles from the airport, I switched to the Common Traffic Advisory Frequency (CTAF). I was shocked and flustered; The explosion of radio chatter came so fast and furious that it almost sounded like a foreign language. I managed to establish that there was a Cessna on downwind, a Piper on final, and another Cessna entering the traffic pattern. That was just the traffic from calls I could understand. The level of chatter led me to conclude there were about 15 other airplanes in the vicinity. I was acutely aware that I had no idea where most of them were.

At that point, I decided to hit the metaphorical pause button and circle about 10 miles from the airport. After a couple of turns and a few minutes of listening, my shattered confidence slightly recovered. I

made my way in, completed my touch-and-go landing, and was on my way back to the perceived sanity of my friendly towered airport. Though completed safely, the whole non-towered experience left my confidence wounded. I made up my mind to limit my exposure to those nasty uncontrolled airports.

But that was not realistic, and it was certainly limiting. After some reflection, I realized that my problem was only a matter of inexperience. I had very little experience at any non-towered airport, much less a busy one. I resolved to use my humbling experience as an incentive to focus more on radio communication, which I did and it helped me become a better pilot. The real solution, the key to feeling much more at home at a non-towered airport, came a year or two later when I spent a summer flying out of one. But, the law of primacy prevails. To this day, given the choice, I would always opt for the towered airport.

### Who Made You My Boss?

There is, of course, a mirror image to my experience. The second group of pilots from my unscientific study includes those whose initial training took place at a non-towered airport. My father illustrates this point. He learned to fly about 10 years before me and flew out of our local non-towered airport. Just as I prefer the familiarity of the towered airport, his strong preference is to avoid ATC as much as possible. Please don't misunderstand. My dad is a perfectly capable pilot, and he can easily deal with ATC. But on the father-son trips we've flown together, I usually get the request, "Hey, why don't you take the radios?"

Anecdotal evidence from years of chatting with fellow pilots suggests that the non-towered preference group is larger. In fact, we regularly receive complaints from general aviation pilots about the inability to fly from point A to point B without talking to an ATC facility. While my personal reaction may be to wonder why talking to ATC is such a burden, I've learned that the root cause is the same one I experienced in the opposite situation: inexperience. Inexperience makes any task seem to be a much larger hassle than it is.

### How Do We Fix It?

A good pilot is proficient in all types of airspace and, with new towers, airspace restrictions, and security requirements, it is important to have good radio communication skills. Practice is the key. If you normally fly at towered airports, make it a point to practice at non-towered fields, and vice versa. I understand that in some cases it is not feasible since the nearest tower could be 100 miles away. But there are still things you can do to make the most of the opportunities you do have.

The first thing to do is get a copy of the Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM) (available at: [http://www.faa.gov/air\\_traffic/publications/ATpubs/AIM/](http://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/ATpubs/AIM/)). Chapter 4 addresses just about everything associated with ATC that a pilot needs to know. While it's all good information, let me direct your focus to sections two and three. Section two covers radio communication, and is replete with good examples of radio transmissions and explanations. Section three covers airport operations. Taken together, these sections can help you build a mental script and map out the radio calls you can expect to hear in various flying environments.

Another tip is to listen to as much ATC as possible. There are websites and even mobile applications that let you tap into live ATC feeds. By listening to these "radios," even passively, you can become more familiar with the language of aviation.

Any time you can spend actively listening, particularly to the feed of an airport you know or use, will help you refine your mental script. You can find feeds of both towered and non-towered airports, although the towered airports seem to be more abundant.

These two methods can improve your comfort level as well as your experience for your next flight, while costing nothing but a little time. That, in turn, can make your next flight less stressful. Lowering stress not only makes your flight more enjoyable, but also safer. And, of course, safe and enjoyable flying is a cause we all support.

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Photo courtesy of ATO