

*Step by Step:*

# Teach Emergencies with the ABCs

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pilots' faces and knuckles. I, for one, can understand all too well. In fact, emergency approaches were one of the hardest areas for me to master when I was learning to fly. I struggled to remember what to do first, fumbled around

the sky looking for the “best” field, and constantly lost my place on the emergency checklist.

In my earliest days as a CFI, I watched both student pilots and flight-review clients suffer though the same kinds of problems. I eventually came across a simple ABC checklist for emergencies, which called for an immediate focus on the most important tasks. Over the years, I have added a few letters and developed the concept into a detailed outline for ground and flight training. It works. Even the most flustered flier can instantly recall the alphabet, and the checklist is structured to stimulate recall of the right tasks in the right sequence.

I start by introducing the emergency alphabet “step letter” outline during a thorough ground briefing. The initial emphasis is on helping the student

remember just the letters: Airspeed, Best field, Checklist, Declare emergency, Exit preparation, Fire prevention, and Ground plan. Next, we work through the questions for each letter. Once we have covered these initial concepts, we go out to practice in the airplane. As the student gains practice, experience, and confidence, I begin to require him or her to verbalize the accompanying thought processes.

**Airspeed.** Students should memorize our best-glide speed and should try not to lose any altitude until reaching that speed. Once there, they trim the aircraft for hands-off glide. The pilot's foremost job is to maintain control of the airplane.

**Best field.** Students begin by noting wind direction and strength, then noting their present position. Are they directly over a suitable field now? Is there a suitable field at “downwind” position? Is there a suitable field at “base” or “final” position? Students should also note their present altitude relative to traffic pattern altitude, or 800 to 1,000 feet above ground level (AGL). Are they too high or low? How can they fix it—flaps, extend, slips, S-turns?

**Checklist.** Student should start with a flow pattern across the panel. If altitude and circumstances permit, they should then review the written

Restart Checklist. Under all circumstances, it's more important to fly the airplane than to check the list.

**D**ecare an emergency. Student should note their present position—for example, five miles south of Brunswick, then tune the radio to 121.5 MHz, which should already be in the standby position. When making the “Mayday” call, they should answer “Who” (tail number), “what,” “where,” and “how many aboard” questions. Lastly, they should set the transponder to 7700.

**E**xit preparation. They should prepare the passengers for the landing by ensuring seatbelts are tightened, then brief passengers on exit procedures and assignments. Make sure the first aid/survival equipment is in a convenient place, and prepare the aircraft—for example, cracking open doors if the pilot operating handbook/airplane flight manual (POH/AFM) so directs.

**F**ire prevention. Shut the fuel off, along with the three Ms: mixture, mags, and master. Ensure the fire extinguisher is close at hand.

**G**round plan. Pilots should touch down at the slowest possible airspeed, and then evacuate the aircraft. They need to account for everyone and use the first aid/survival equipment as needed.

Teaching appropriate and effective responses and procedures for aviation emergencies is indisputably one of the flight instructor’s most important responsibilities. Although this method generally requires more preflight briefing time than a more traditional generic approach, it’s well worth the time. I have found that the emergency alphabet “step letter” is a terrific tool in helping students climb toward competence in this most vital of pilot skills.

*This article originally appeared in the National Association of Flight Instructors Mentor and is reprinted with permission.*

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