

Head of the Class: The Student Pilot Edition

BY SABRINA WOODS

Photo by Susan Parson



Pilot #1 is a rookie aviator, new to the cockpit and just learning all of the basics of manipulating an aircraft into flight. She is eager, determined, and keen. Pilot #2 is a seasoned, grizzled, veteran of flight. With well over 3,000 hours, he is looking to move on to more advanced credentialing by obtaining his airline transport pilot certificate.

So which student fares better in flight training adventures?

The answer: it depends.

Fledgling Follies

"They don't know what they don't know," says Allan Kash, an FAA aviation safety inspector (and certificated flight instructor [CFI]), about his *ab initio* students — those just entering the very first stages of flight training. It might sound like a knock against his students, but in reality, "not knowing" much can be a good thing. There are no preconceived ideas interfering with what he is trying to relay to the learner.

The most successful students tend to be absorbent sponges, awed by what they are attempting but tinged with just enough healthy trepidation and respect for the task to achieve their goals while mitigating risk. That little bit of wariness is key because "overconfidence can be dangerous," according to Marcel Bernard, also a CFI now working for the FAA.

"When providing flight instruction, some students can become overconfident — their perception is that their skills are better than they really are." Another concern is when it becomes obvious that the student isn't taking the time needed outside of the cockpit to ensure understanding. And by that I mean they just aren't studying.

In these circumstances, Bernard explains that it is his job to be explicit about what is considered

"acceptable performance." It can be kinesthetic (hands on), like pointing out to his student that he/she has to touch down within the first 200 feet of the landing area (versus 400 feet down the runway), or it can take the form of good old fashioned book knowledge, such as being able to remember, understand, and respect aircraft operating limitations.

Bernard points out that it is imperative for the flight instructor, not the learner, to determine and communicate acceptable performance. In addition, the instructor needs to provide constructive criticism, while being supportive and emphasizing/praising the skills the student has performed well. A good student has to be willing to receive it all.

This is not to say that a CFI, when relinquishing the yoke, won't have a few moments of anxiety while even the most diligent student navigates through the trickier parts of flight. But this is all taken in stride and capped by a feeling of pride and satisfaction in seeing one's protégé succeed.

"When teaching someone to fly there is nothing more gratifying than to see them go from frustration and dismay, to the exhilaration and joy of getting a flight maneuver — especially landings — just right," reflects Bernard.

"Been There, Done That" Mentality

On the other end of the aviation education spectrum is the seasoned pilot endeavoring to take the next step. They are already on the right path — increasing their education — and most of the time their past experiences make it easier to perform.

Sometimes, though, that previous exposure can work as a disservice. "Some pilots-in-training slip into the 'just lemme at it' attitude," says Kash. As a result, they might not be as diligent in preparing or studying for a phase of training simply because they believe they have "been there, done that." In addition, some pilots who have been around for a while can lose a bit of the caution they had in the newbie stage. This

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can lead to mistakes. Worse, established bad habits or unique ways of “getting it done” might be hard to overcome, as well as detract from what the instructor is trying to teach.

Says Joe Morra, yet another CFI in the FAA: “I remember doing some instrument training in a guy’s own airplane. He had his own way of doing things. One way that he tried to save some money and fuel was to get his instrument clearance on a handheld transceiver rather than start up the aircraft or power up all of his avionics. I questioned this method but he insisted that he had done this ‘many times’ with other instructors.

“It was either our position at the airport or maybe the transceiver didn’t have enough juice, but the clearance came through in broken transmissions. The pilot ended up frustrated, which affected his ability to correctly read back his clearance. It got so bad the controller finally asked if there was an instructor onboard the aircraft. That is NEVER a good thing to hear, especially for a seasoned aircraft owner,” Morra remembers, chuckling.

“We both learned that the handheld clearance method might not always be the best way to go. In the end it was a successful flight despite the rocky start.”

Class Valedictorian?

These reflections and memories of CFIs echo each other regardless of whether they are talking about the *ab initio* or the veterans. So which aviator goes to the head of the class?

A student pilot is, by definition, an inquisitive person. He or she can be motivated by the science or art of flying, or simply driven by that innate human desire to fly. CFIs will always have different experiences with their students but the one thing they all agree on is that it doesn’t much matter if a person is brand new off the street, or if they have been flying for years. It’s the person’s attitude and willingness to put forth the extra time and effort that ultimately lead to success in a flight training program. Given that perspective, anyone can be class valedictorian. You should aim for no less! ✈️

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