



So You Want to Be a Pilot?

Finding the Right School: Part 61 vs. Part 141

BY SABRINA WOODS

Photo by Tom Hoffmann

Looking skyward, face tilted up towards the dazzling blue, the sun's rays warm you as you watch all sorts of aircraft go zooming back and forth. There are single-engine marvels, multiengine wonders, rustic warbirds, and spectacular rotorcraft. There are brilliant paint schemes, gleaming components, high-tech gadgetry, and proud "papas" and "mamas" just itching to show off everything from their carefully restored vintage Stearman C3B, to a fresh-from-assembly SC07 *Speed Cruiser*.

It is an air show — all of the general aviation community's finest are on display and YOU want to be a part of it. YOU want to be a pilot ... but where do you start? This is something I have been thinking about for myself lately, so I decided to go to the experts in FAA's General Aviation and Commercial Division's Airman Certification and Training Branch to pick their brains about the process. What I have learned I gladly pass on to you.

But First Thing is First ...

... And that is making sure you are cleared to fly. In order to fly solo, you will need to obtain a student pilot certificate. As of this writing, requirements include being 16 years of age or older for powered aircraft, and reading, understanding, and speaking English. You must pass a flight physical administered by an aviation

medical examiner to get a combination medical and student pilot certificate. An alternative is to seek out an FAA inspector or an FAA-designated pilot examiner to obtain (just) your student pilot certificate. Then you are ready for the next step.

In Lewis Carroll's famous book "Alice in Wonderland" the lead protagonist Alice is lost and approaches the Cheshire Cat, presumably to ask for directions. The following ensues:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" (Alice)

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." (Cheshire Cat)

"I don't much care where —"

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

Insufferable as the answer might seem, the Cheshire Cat has a point — your next step should be determining what type of flying you hope to do. That will get you on the right path to mapping out your flying future.

The most common certificate categories are recreational — flying for the pure fun of it; sport — for those who only want to fly Light Sport Aircraft, and private — for those who might want to transition to flying as a profession. Each of these categories has

its own regulations and curriculum requirements. Depending on which you chose, that decision will lead you to choosing either a part 61 training facility or part 141 pilot school.

If those two concepts are a little bit foreign, then this is definitely the article for you. Pilot training typically takes one of three avenues: the two schools mentioned previously (more on those later) and a third option, which I refer to as the “I’ve been flying since I could walk” path to certification. If you are like me, you weren’t lucky enough to be in that latter category. So I will dedicate most of this article to distinguishing between the two schools, and determining (hopefully) which one is right for you.

Two Schools of Thought

As I mentioned earlier, what you want to do with your pilot certificate plays a key role in picking a school. If your goal is to fulfill a lifelong dream of “punching holes in the sky” for fun and leisure, a very popular option is the Sport Pilot certificate. Sport Pilot certification — awarded with the intention of flying only light sport aircraft — has slightly fewer requirements for training than the private pilot and recreational certification. An added bonus is the category’s acceptance of a driver’s license in lieu of a medical.

You can also pursue a recreational pilot certificate, which is very similar to the light sport but has additional privileges and medical requirements. These certifications are ideal for scratching that “hole punching” itch and, while you can obtain either through both part 61 and 141 schools, a part 61 training program might be the better option if your work and personal obligations limit you on the times you can commit to ground and flight training.

A flight school’s training program is defined by federal regulations that give the school its authority to

train pilots. Under part 61, the minimum flight hours are 20 hours for a sport pilot certificate, 30 hours for a recreational certificate, and 40 hours for a private pilot certificate. These training programs are considered to be slightly less structured, and therefore more flexible than their part 141 counterparts. While *all* of the educational requirements and minimum flight hours mandated by the FAA must be accomplished, a part 61 training program gives the instructor the authority to pick and choose when, how, and where to cover the required material. In addition, a “second check” by an evaluator (other than your instructor and required in part 141) is not required although a final practical test is by an examiner.

Another bonus to the part 61 process is that the student (you) can take your time interviewing and selecting a “best fit” instructor to ensure that your needs are met. This might not happen as readily in the more structured 141 program. To learn more about selecting a certificated flight instructor (CFI) check out Susan Parson’s article “Wanted: The Perfect Flight Instructor” in this same edition of *FAA Safety Briefing*.

Lastly, students under the part 61 curriculum are not required to accomplish formal ground school training. However, passing knowledge and practical tests are still required, just as they are under part 141.

Just a side note here: although a school might identify itself as being “part 141,” this does not mean that it cannot take a part 61 approach to training an individual. Keep that in mind when you are selecting a school as it might be something that can be of benefit to you later should your training interests change.

If your heart is more set on becoming a pilot for compensation — i.e. to pilot an aircraft in the tourism, agriculture, or transport industries and get paid as a result — then a part 141 curriculum might be a better

Regardless if you choose the part 61 or the part 141 route, all of the minimum educational requirements and flights hours must be accomplished.



fit. Especially for those wanting to become a “driver” for Delta, XOJET, or Southwest (to name a few), several advanced requirements such as airline transport pilot certificate, CFI, and multi-engine ratings will be required.

A part 141 school uses FAA-approved syllabi and lesson plans, and is regularly evaluated by the agency to ensure integrity and quality within the program. Because of its structure, this training program is better suited to those individuals who can take it on full-time. A student must complete a minimum of 35 flight hours to obtain a private pilot certificate (five less than part 61) and 190 flight hours for commercial (250 under part 61). Don’t get too hung up in the numbers for either school, however. The current national average for completing either school’s initial pilot program is around 60-75 hours. It all depends on your ability, flying frequency, and attitude.

Finally, unlike part 61 training programs that might never have to disclose the institution’s pass/fail rates, part 141 schools must meet student performance rates.

As such, many hiring agencies see the part 141 process as being more desirable simply due to the level of oversight involved.

The “Neil Armstrong” Route


Famed pilot and astronaut Neil Armstrong was flying aircraft solo at the age of 16, even before he had a driver’s license. If you, too, were lucky enough to have been introduced to flying at a young age and have learned and progressed steadily through the years, there is a way to forgo the formal schoolhouse training and apply for certification — provided you have maintained the proper documentation. At a minimum, you must be 16 years of age (to solo in a powered aircraft), have logged at least 20 hours of training and 20 solo hours under part 61, and have it all documented in a logbook and endorsed by an authorized instructor. Then, once you have demonstrated understanding to a designated pilot examiner, you can go on to take the required tests to get certificated.

Mastering the art of flight is just one of man’s many wondrous achievements. Regardless of what path you take to obtain your wings, you’ll have to learn, demonstrate, and test according to the same knowledge and skill. So once you have determined what it is you really want, the next step is to pick a handful of schools that interest you, research what they have to offer, and list the pros and cons of each. In this research, you will want to ask yourself a few key questions such as: Does the school meet your needs? How long has it been in business and what is its success rate? Does it come highly recommended by respected aviators? Does it have tools available for further learning and advanced credentials? One

The Collegiate Route

One other avenue for flight training is through a college or university with an aviation degree program such as Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, the University of North Dakota, or Purdue University. An added bonus is that there are a wide variety of financial aid programs, scholarships, grants, and student loans to help augment the often hefty bill that flight training can come with.

FAA-authorized aviation degree programs offer the perfect combination of a four-year degree, the total college experience, and the flight instruction necessary to become a professional pilot. Beyond this, some universities have applied and been authorized to certify its graduates for a restricted ATP certificate. This means that if you receive an Associate’s degree with 30 or more hours in specific aviation curriculum, you may be eligible to receive a 250 flight hour reduction in flight time towards the ATP certificate (typically 1,500 hours). If you complete 60 or more hours in a Bachelor’s program, you might receive up to a 500 hour reduction. For a list of FAA authorized institutions of higher education, check out www.faa.gov/go/InstitutionalAuthority

suggestion would be to pick a school that has access to simulators. These aviation training devices can help reduce costs, improve your training, and give you experience “flying” in unlikely and dangerous emergency scenarios. And, should your needs change during the program, does the school have a way to absorb or work with that change? Then, pick your place based on what you find out. New experiences and journeys await you, student pilot. May your winds be light, the temperatures mild, and your visibility unlimited. 

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