

# WANTED: THE PERFECT FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

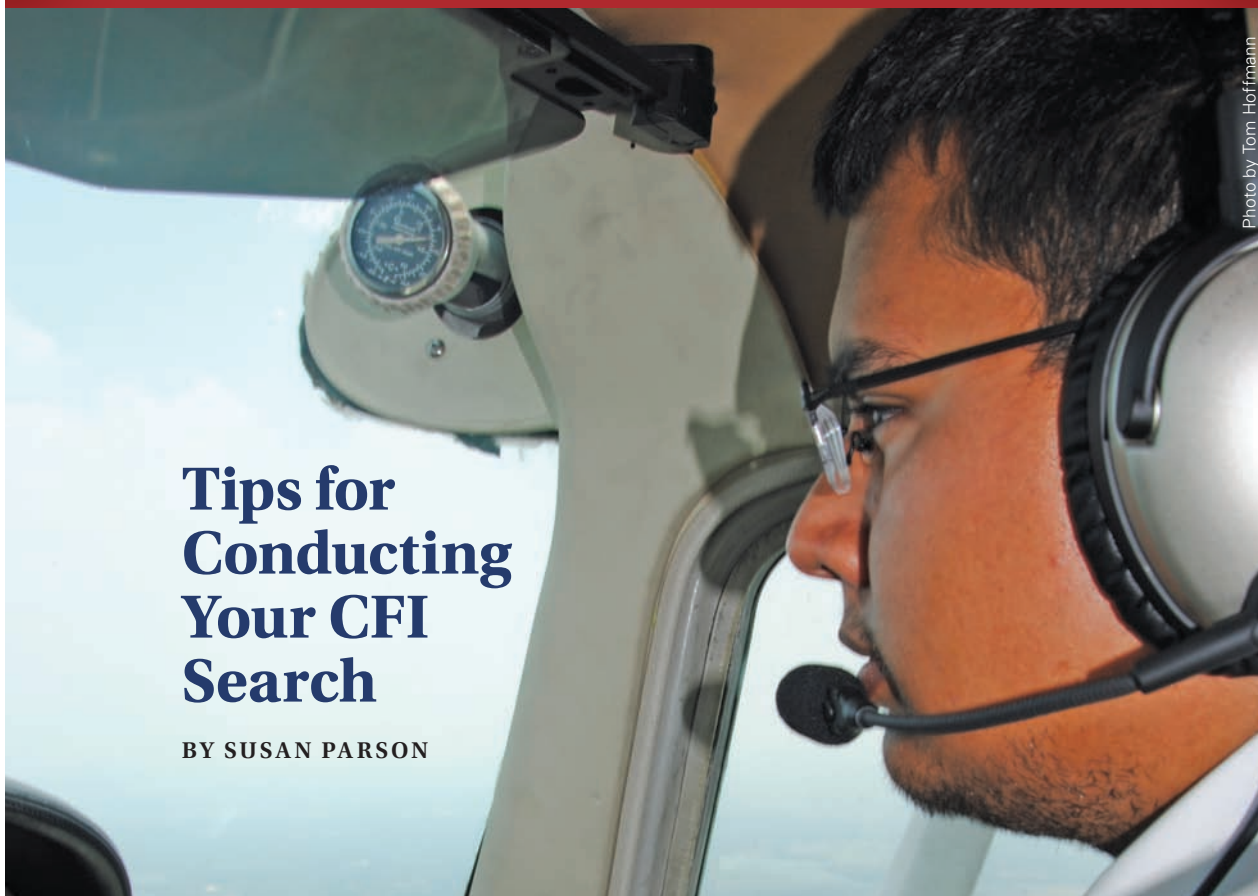


Photo by Tom Hoffmann

## Tips for Conducting Your CFI Search

BY SUSAN PARSON

**W**hen I launched my learn-to-fly quest in the early 1990s, I didn't have any real guidance on finding the right flight instructor. I'm the first and only pilot in my immediate family and, since I had just returned from several years of living and working overseas through my State Department job, I didn't yet have a trusted circle of local friends. The Internet was barely a gleam in someone's eye. In short, I was pretty much on my own to figure it out.

I did actually find a first-rate flight instructor. Warren (now an airline pilot) took me through training not just for the private pilot certificate, but also for my instrument rating, advanced and instrument ground instructor, commercial certificate, and certificated flight instructor (CFI) qualifications. I was very fortunate to have a highly-qualified, conscientious, and safety-conscious CFI right from the start. I could say that I just got lucky — and to a certain extent that's true. In the absence of better guidance, I relied heavily on the gut check method of CFI selection. I met and ruled out several CFIs before I met Warren. Within the first five minutes of our discussion, I knew he was "the one."

I still contend that the gut check method of CFI selection has its place, but the richness of research

resources these days means that the gut check should be only one element in your search for the perfect (for you) CFI.

### Step One: Conduct Internet Research

Since we now have the benefit of the Internet plus a panoply of portable gadgets that allow anytime/anywhere Web access, that's a good place to initiate your CFI search. Start with the letter "A" for AOPA — the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association ([www.aopa.org](http://www.aopa.org)). Placing your mouse on the home page "Pilot Resources" tab will reveal a drop-down menu whose very first item is "Learn to Fly." The resources available there will give you a great overview — and you can download AOPA's three free "Flight Training Field Guides."

Next, check out the schools — bearing in mind the part 61/part 141 differences that Sabrina Woods explains on page 9. You can Google "flight schools," but another option is to use the AOPA Flight Training magazine's online flight school directory search tool ([http://flighttraining.aopa.org/learntofly/school/flight\\_schools/](http://flighttraining.aopa.org/learntofly/school/flight_schools/)).

To further narrow the search for a quality instructor in your area, you might also check for instructors

who have earned the FAA's Gold Seal Flight Instructor certificate. This credential indicates a CFI that has instructed at least 10 students with an 80-percent success rate on their initial checkride and/or has conducted a minimum number of practical or graduation tests. You can also do a search for many industry-recognized CFIs at organizations like Master Instructors LLC, the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI), and the Society for Aviation and Flight Educators (SAFE), all of which maintain lists organized by location. See "Learn More" at the end of this article for links to these organizations.

### Step Two: Seek Recommendations

If you are interested in learning to fly, chances are good that you know at least one person who already flies. If that person lives in your area, ask for his or her recommendations regarding flight schools and flight instructors. Ask if your pilot friend has any knowledge of the CFIs you have already listed from your Internet research. You might also get a few names you didn't find through your own investigation. Either way, don't let an "oh, he's a great guy" sort of response be the end of the discussion. Ask lots of questions. For example:

- Would you recommend this instructor — in general and, specifically, for me?
- Why do you think this CFI would be a good fit for my needs?
- Did you fly with this instructor, or do you know anyone else who did?
- How would you describe his or her greatest strengths as a flight instructor?
- Did anything about this person — not limited to teaching techniques — cause you concern?
- What else should I know or consider?

### Step Three: Do the Gut Check

Once you have used the first two steps to narrow your search to a handful of specific individual CFIs, the next step is to meet each one and conduct an interview. Keep in mind that "interview" is very much the appropriate term for this part of the process, because you are the employer. You are considering whether to hire this person for a very important job. Remember that it's not just a question of time and money. For the first part of your flight training, in fact, you will be completely dependent on this person for your safety and well-being. Just as with any job interview, you need to be well prepared. Here are a few questions you might consider asking a prospective CFI:

- Why did you become a CFI?
- How long have you been a CFI?
- How many students have you taught to fly?
- How many of your students passed the check ride on the first attempt?

- How long does it usually take your students to earn a private pilot certificate?
- What do you like most about flight instructing?
- How would you describe your teaching style?
- Do you use a syllabus? Could you show it to me?
- What are your career goals?
- What do you expect from your students?

I'm sure you can think of many other questions, but these are a good place to start the get acquainted process. What the instructor says in response to these questions will give you some important objective information about the instructor's teaching methods, success rate, and level of experience. But you must also pay close attention to how the instructor responds, because that will be an important part of the gut check. The reality is that many flight instructors entered the flight training business because it is the only realistic way to get the flight time and experience to qualify for an air carrier job. There's nothing wrong with an instructor who wants to work for an airline, but you want to be sure that he or she is not just marking time. The instructor should be able to persuade you, through both the answers provided and general demeanor, that you will get his or her best instructional efforts. If you get any sense that your prospective instructor is merely going through the motions, you should say "thanks for your time" and make your own motions toward the exit.

I was not savvy enough to have a specific list of questions for my prospective flight instructors, but I can tell you why Warren passed my gut check test. He was:

- Professional. When the flight school referred my call to Warren, he scheduled an appointment for me so we could have uninterrupted time to talk. He was neatly dressed and on time. He greeted me by name and treated me with courtesy and respect.
- Organized. Warren offered to walk me through the school's standard ground and flight training curriculum. He took me to the flight line to show me the school's training fleet, and he answered my questions about choosing the right aircraft. He explained that very few weekend students actually finish training in just 40 hours, and gave me what turned out to be a very accurate average

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number of hours for completion. He told me what he expected from a student, and what a student should expect from him as a flight instructor.

- **Honest.** Warren explained that in addition to the school's enrollment kit, I would probably need and want to purchase additional items such as a headset. I also respected his honesty with respect to two key points. He indicated that I would be his first student, but he outlined his own training/experience and told me why he thought he would be the instructor I needed. In addition, he was very clear about his airline career goals, but he explained that he expected to be at the flight school for at least 12-18 months. I also got an outline of how the school handles the transition of students from one instructor to another.

Needless to say, I was sold. I'm happy to say I never had a second thought or a second's regret about my CFI selection.

Before you make your final hiring decision, though, consider requesting an introductory flight lesson with your prospective CFI. The modest cost of a brief introductory lesson could save you a great deal of money — not to mention emotional distress — if you discover that you and your otherwise perfect CFI clash where it counts — in the cockpit.

### Step ... Away?

That leads to my final point. Even if you have been very careful and conscientious in conducting your CFI search, it's entirely possible for something to go awry in terms of the all-important personal relationship, mutual respect, and interpersonal "chemistry." If the chemistry is off in any way, don't wait for something to explode! Take action right away. If possible, explicitly identify

the element or elements that are creating conflict or discomfort. Talk to your instructor. If the issues can be addressed, you've both learned something. If the instructor reacts in a defensive or negative way, you have learned something. Courteously but firmly end the CFI/student relationship, and ask to speak to the school's chief instructor about hiring a different instructor. If the school does not accommodate your request, find another school. There is far too much at stake in terms of safety, time, and money to remain in a dysfunctional instructional situation. Besides, flying and flight training are supposed to be fun — and, with the right instructor, that's exactly how it works.

Happy hunting! ✈️

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### Learn More:

#### Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association

[www.aopa.org](http://www.aopa.org)

#### AOPA Flight Training

[flighttraining.aopa.org/learntofly/school/flight\\_schools/](http://flighttraining.aopa.org/learntofly/school/flight_schools/)

#### Master Instructors LLC

[www.masterinstructors.org/](http://www.masterinstructors.org/)

#### National Association of Flight Instructors

[www.nafinet.org/](http://www.nafinet.org/)

#### Society for Aviation and Flight Educators

[www.safepilots.org/](http://www.safepilots.org/)

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