



Teaching Tip; Aircraft Lights

By Larry Bothe, MCFI, DPE, 2/2/2009

When administering checkrides I often find that applicants are confused about aircraft exterior lights. The reason for this is duplicate and confusing terminology. Both experienced pilots and CFI's use the terms "position lights" and "navigation (or nav) lights" interchangeably. Student pilots think we are talking about different things unless we specifically explain that they are one and the same. And you must emphasize the white light that faces to the rear; that it is part of the three-light group that comprises the position or nav lights.

Also confusing to the new pilot is the usage of the term "beacon". It has 3 meanings; the flashing red light on top of the tail, the green-and-white thing that goes around at the airport, and the radio transmitter 4-miles out on final. We know which one we mean by context, but the student is lost. Making it worse is that the CFR's call for a "flashing anti-collision light, aviation red or white...", with no mention of the word "beacon." Throw in that wingtip strobe lights, "strobes", are another form of flashing anti-collision light (optional on most older planes) that can substitute for the "beacon", and it is no wonder that students can't get aircraft lighting sorted out in their mind.

When you teach aircraft lighting you have to be very careful to use proper terminology yourself. Be consistent. Explain and emphasize the duplicate terms students will hear around the airport. Oh, and when you're doing those 10 boring night takeoffs and landings, be sure to let the students try a couple with the landing light turned off. They'll thank you later when they have one fail in flight.

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