

# Choosing Your Flight School

## *AOPA Flight Training*



Learning to fly can be one of life's most rewarding adventures. The freedom of moving in three dimensions is not only fun, but can lead to interesting career and travel opportunities. To take advantage of aviation's rewards, you must make sure you get the good, solid information that you'll need to be a safe, confident pilot in the air. One of the most important steps in that process is finding the right flight school.

*AOPA Flight Training* magazine has prepared the following general guidance information. It is intended as an aid for anyone interested in learning to fly and for selecting the training organization that will meet the individual's specific needs.

Without any aviation experience on which to base your decision, selecting a good school can be a formidable task. Aviation is procedural and not well suited to impatience. Whether you're flying or picking a school, making rash, hurried decisions can cause dire consequences. Checklists are an aviation mainstay that ensure all procedures are accomplished and, therefore, make for safe flights. This same procedure can be applied to selecting a good flight school.

### **How to Determine What You Need & Want**

At the beginning of your flight school search, it helps if you have a general idea of what you want from aviation. Why do you want to learn to fly? What is your ultimate, long-term aviation goal? Do you want to fly for fun, or are you seeking a flying career? Will your flying be local, or do you want to use general aviation aircraft to travel? Do you want to own an airplane or will you rent? These are questions you should answer before you start considering flight schools. And you should consider whether you'll train full time or part time; that can make a big difference in your school selection criteria.

### **Types of Schools - Part 61 & Part 141**

Flight schools come in two flavors, Part 61 and Part 141, which refer to the parts of the Federal Aviation Regulations (FARs) under which they operate. The most common and least important distinction between them is the minimum flight time required for the private certificate - 40 hours under Part 61, and 35 hours under Part 141.

Considering that the national average for earning a private certificate is 60-75 hours (how long you'll take will depend on your ability and flying frequency), this difference isn't important for initial training. It does make a difference to commercial pilot applicants: Part 61 requires 250 hours, and Part 141 requires 190.

What differentiates the two is structure and accountability. Part 141 schools are periodically audited by the FAA and must have detailed, FAA-approved course outlines and meet student performance rates. Part 61 schools don't have the same paperwork and accountability requirements.

Learning under Part 61 rules can often give students the flexibility to rearrange lesson content and sequence to meet their needs, which can be of benefit to part-time students. Many Part 141 schools also train students under Part 61 rules.

Which type of school is best for you depends on your needs, available time, and other factors, such as veteran's benefit eligibility (only Part 141 schools can qualify for VA-reimbursed training) and location. When it comes to the FAA checkride, which is the same for all, it doesn't matter where you learned to fly, only how well - including your understanding of aviation academic material.

Although flight schools fall into two basic categories, Part 61 or Part 141, there is a third category that bears serious consideration by prospective pilots, particularly those planning a professional piloting career: nationally accredited training institutions. Accredited schools must meet rigid standards of accountability for virtually every area of operation and must apply to an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

Collegiate aviation degree programs also play a large part in today's training marketplace, and you should consider earning a degree if you are planning a professional flying career. A plus in seeking a degree is that in many cases you are eligible for financial aid and scholarships that will assist you, not only in your academic endeavors, but in flight training as well.

### **Compile a List of Choices & Schools**

Once you've given some thought to what you want, start putting together a list of possible flight schools. Then request all available literature from each. Ask them to send an outline or curriculum for each program in which you're interested, and a copy of the school's regulations and flight operations procedures.

Don't base your decision on the literature alone! You're looking for informative substance, and this can be found as well in photocopied sheets as it can in full-color catalogs. While scrutinizing the material, take notes for use during the school visit, when you'll check the veracity of its claims. Some things to look for:

The school's philosophy, goals, and objectives, and how they match your needs.

Are there such benefits as housing, financial aid, and additional training, such as aerobatics, that will broaden your experience?

How important is flight training to the organization?

How long has the flight school been in business?

What about the school's instructional staff, its enrollment numbers, and credentials?

How many and what types of aircraft are used in the school's flight instruction program?

What are the school's classrooms like?

What services are available at its airport (instrument approaches and control towers)?

What is the school's reputation on regulations and safety policies?

### **Take a Firsthand Look - It's Your Money**

If you do nothing else in your school search - visit the school!

Your first contact will likely be an admissions officer or the chief flight instructor. Listen closely and ask questions about everything. Don't be shy. If you don't understand something, ask! During your tour, ensure that no area is left unvisited, from administrative offices to the maintenance area.

Interview the school's chief flight instructor or his or her assistant. Some questions to ask:

Are progressive flight-checks given? (These checks evaluate your progress during the training program.)

What's the instructor-to-student ratio? (Generally speaking, an instructor can adequately educate four of five full-time students, or 10 or more part-timers, depending on their schedules.)

Who schedules lessons, and how is it done?

What are the insurance requirements of the school, and how do its liability and collision policies work? Will you be responsible for a deductible, and how much is that deductible in the event of a loss? What is your coverage as a student?

Who keeps your records? (This is important because poor documentation can cause you to repeat training.)

What happens when weather or maintenance problems cancel a lesson? Who's responsible for rescheduling lessons and reporting maintenance problems?

After the official tour, get away by yourself and talk to other students in training. Ask them to rate the training's quality and explain what problems they've had, if any, and how they were dealt with.

Other important information resources can be the local FAA Flight Standards District Office, the Better Business Bureau, and the Chamber of Commerce. They may offer important insights on such topics as a school's safety record and business practices. Don't forget such applicable sources as the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, National Air Transportation Association, Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology, if so accredited, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, if you are an international student.

### **Don't Overlook Ground School**

Learning to fly requires that you obtain the ability to manipulate the controls of the airplane and make it perform certain maneuvers. However, there is another aspect of learning to fly, and that is the academic knowledge required to understand how, where, and when to fly safely. This is accomplished in ground school.

Ground school takes two basic forms: an instructor teaching a scheduled class or a self-paced, home-study program using video or audio tapes and/or a computer-based program.

Which is better depends on you. If you're a self-disciplined self-starter, the self-paced video programs can't be beat. You can "attend" ground school on your schedule and review the tapes as needed. If you need the discipline of the classroom, well, the choice is obvious. Perhaps the best option is a combination of the two. Many schools have a traditional classroom ground school and a resource room that contains self-paced materials for additional study.

Many local community colleges or independent ground schools are also an option. Although technically not part of ground school, instrument ground trainers (or simulators) are being used by a number of schools in primary training, and they are a real benefit in instrument training.

After ground school and before you can take your FAA checkride with a designated pilot examiner, you must take and pass (70 percent or better) an FAA airman knowledge test at an approved computer testing site. A growing number of schools offer FAA-approved computer testing as part of their services.

### **Training Aircraft**

The training airplane is where you practice in the air what you've learned on the ground. High wing or low, it doesn't make much difference. What's important is how well the airplane is equipped and maintained. It's also important that the school's trainers are dedicated to training and not to rental.

How many trainers a school has depends on the number of active students. Generally speaking, one trainer serves four or five full-time students. This ratio may be higher with part-time students. Another consideration is the fleet's mix of primary, advanced, and multiengine trainers.

Because trainers are flown often and sometimes hard, how a school maintains its training fleet is important for both safety and scheduling. Asking questions about maintenance policies and procedures should be part of every school interview.

### **Flight Instructors**

A good flight instructor is important because your life will depend on what he or she teaches you. Don't hesitate to ask questions about the training and experience of the flight instructors. You might ask what the average flight time is and what the pass/fail rate is among the instructors. (A pass rate of 100 percent doesn't indicate good instruction.) You might also talk to some of the other students at the school to ask about their flight instructors.

Your primary instructor should be at least a certificated flight instructor (CFI). Ensure that your instrument instructor has an instrument instructor rating (CFII). Instrument training received from a non-rated instructor can cause problems when it comes to meeting FAA requirements.

A good way to get acquainted with your instructor is to take an introductory lesson (not just a demonstration ride). During your lesson, assess your instructor's attitude. Only you can determine what personality best fits yours, but you want an instructor who expects perfection, who will work with you until it's achieved, and who cares about you as a person as well as a student.

### **Cost**

Compared with most of your current activities, learning to fly is expensive. But remember, you're investing in your education, in skills that will open new worlds and opportunities. Flying is an activity of purpose, productivity, and pleasure. It's also a never-ending learning process and as with all education, your initial training provides the foundation for all that will follow.

Looking at the bottom line, you'll notice that, adjusting for location and differences in training programs, schools more or less charge about the same. Only you can determine if what you get for your money is fair. As with any other major purchase, if a deal seems too good to be true, it usually is.

When comparing costs, make sure you're comparing "apples with apples." Some schools base their prices on the FAA minimum-time requirements, such as 40 hours for a private certificate. Others base their prices on a more realistic figure that's the average of what their students accomplish. Some include books and supplies, ground school, flight testing, and FAA written examination fees. Others don't. In other words, read the fine print, and ensure you're making a comparison of equals!

Because most schools require partial or full payment before training begins, financing your flight training, especially if you are in a professional pilot program, will be your greatest challenge. Some schools offer financing, and most have financing and loan information. AOPA, for example, offers its Flight Funds loan program to its qualified members. Schools also offer "block time" prices if you pay for a certain amount of training, or flight time, in advance, which can often offer substantial savings.

Some schools guarantee their training - that you'll earn your certificate for a fixed price no matter how long it takes. Read the fine print carefully, because many of these guarantees expire after so many flight hours. If you haven't achieved your goal in this time, the school will still train you, but you'll have to pay for the training that takes place above the guarantee's ceiling.

Also inquire about refunds. Most schools require that you pay for part or all of your training in advance, which prevents you from training and running before the bills are paid. But if you must stop training for some reason, you should know if and how much of your money will be refunded.

Unless your instructor's fees are part of a "package price" program, know how you are charged for his or her educational services, and how much you're charged for aircraft rental. Aircraft rental and the instructor time are usually charged by the Hobbs meter, which is a timing device activated by oil pressure. If the engine is running, so is the meter. Even if you're sitting on the ground, you're still charged for it.

Also learn if the instructor is paid for pre- and post-flight briefings in addition to flight time. These are crucial parts of every lesson, and if the instructor is not paid for them, you may get abbreviated briefings before you start the engine, and then get the rest of the briefing while the engine and the meter are running.

There's an old saying that says, "Time is money." In your research, make sure that you're getting the best quality training for your dollar.

### **The Final Decision**

What flight school you ultimately choose depends on the quality training you desire in a method convenient to your schedule. In earning your private pilot's certificate, you will have achieved a "license" to learn. Aviation is an ever-changing activity, and good pilots are always learning.

Perhaps the final deciding factor between several schools that are running in a dead heat is personality. Like people, schools have personalities. Some are deadly serious, while others are more familial in nature. Only you can select the one that matches your personality.

### **A CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING A GOOD FLIGHT SCHOOL**

- Determine your aviation goals. Are you learning to fly for fun or do you plan to pursue a career?
- Compile a list of schools to examine, and request literature from each. Review material from each school and answer the questions outlined earlier in this brochure.
- Once you've done your "homework", visit the final two or three schools that pass the test. Ask questions and get a feel for the personalities of the schools. Ask specific questions and insist on specific answers. Talk to other students and flight instructors.
- Once you've decided on a school, be sure a written agreement outlines the payment procedures.