



May 2008 Features

# Earning Your Wings

## Eight steps to a pilot certificate

By Christopher L. Parker

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It took me more than a year to earn my private pilot certificate, but that's not typical. My instructor and I both had full-time jobs, so my lessons were on the weekends, with an occasional evening flight when the days grew longer and the weather was good. Mine was a long road, with twists and turns and even a few speed bumps along the way. Students today also can consider a sport pilot certificate or recreational pilot certificate as their entry into the world of flying; those certificates require less training than a private pilot certificate but impose some operational limits on the pilot.

Sure, as a student I knew generally where we were headed, and what we were working toward: my first solo, some cross-country work, and some night flights. But I wanted the big picture. When I became an instructor, I vowed to keep my students informed about exactly where they stood in the program. If a student doesn't have that big-picture perspective, it's harder for him to get motivated. These eight steps provide a great overview.

### **Step one: The intro flight**

One day, either through someone's generous gift or your own curiosity, you'll visit a local flight school. That visit will probably lead to an introductory or "intro" flight, where you'll go up with an instructor to see what a routine flight in a small airplane is like.

Your instructor will usually make the takeoff, but once at a safe altitude, he'll hand you the controls. You'll fly out to the practice area, where you'll try your hand at the four fundamentals: straight and level flight, climbs, descents, and turns. Here you'll be able to get the feel of the airplane, and find out if flying is for you. Then you'll guide the airplane back to the airport. After landing, the instructor will answer your questions and ask you if you'd like to book a lesson.

### **Step two: Eligibility**

Before you invest your time and money, you'll want to make sure you meet the eligibility requirements for a pilot certificate (private, recreational, and sport pilot differ) and medical certificate (required for private and recreational pilots). You'll need a student pilot certificate to solo (the medical certificate does double duty for aspiring private and recreational pilots).

The good news is that almost anyone can qualify for a pilot certificate and the medical certificate required for private and recreational pilots. Even people with seemingly serious physical limitations, such as the loss of a limb, impaired vision, or poor hearing, are training and earning pilot certificates.

All of these eligibility requirements are found in the federal aviation regulations (FARs). FAR Part 67, for example, covers the medical certification standards for airmen. Obviously written by lawyers for doctors, these requirements can be confusing. Fortunately, if you ever have any doubt about how a particular medical condition may affect your ability to fly, call AOPA at 800/USA-AOPA or [visit the Web site](#). AOPA's Medical Certification department has trained specialists who can answer your questions, usually right on the spot.

You'll want to look at FAR 61.83, "Eligibility requirements for student pilots." There's a minimum age requirement (16 years for airplane) and another requirement that you be able to read, speak, and understand the English language.

Since no one wants to be a student pilot forever, next look at FAR 61.103, which lists the general eligibility requirements for a private pilot certificate. The minimum age moves up to 17 years (which means you can start training at age 16); the "read, speak, and understand the English language" phrase is repeated; and there's a list of other requirements. You must take and pass a test on aeronautical knowledge; you need to receive certain flight training and meet specific aeronautical experience requirements; and, finally, you must take and pass a checkride.

| <b>Quick comparison of pilot certificates</b>               |                      |                             |   |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Requirements or type of operation</b>                    | <b>Private pilot</b> | <b>Recreational pilot</b>   | <b>Sport pilot</b>                                      |
| <b>FAA medical certificate required</b>                     | Yes                  | Yes                         | Medical or U.S. driver's license and self-certification |
| <b>Aircraft size limitations</b>                            | Unlimited            | 180 hp max (four seats max) | 1,320 lb. max aircraft weight (two seats max)           |
| <b>May carry more than one passenger</b>                    | Yes                  | No                          | No  |
| <b>Minimum flight training time required by regulations</b> | 40 hours             | 30 hours                    | 20 hours  |
| <b>Night flight</b>   | Yes                  | Restricted                  | No  |

### **Step three: Student pilot certificate**

Although a student pilot certificate is not required to take lessons, you will need one to fly solo. (That is, to fly by yourself without your instructor on board, after you've met requirements and obtained the instructor's endorsement.) This certificate is good for two years and, much like the learner's permit of a student driver, allows you to take lessons and fly solo while accumulating the aeronautical experience to become a private pilot. Most commonly, an aviation medical examiner (AME) issues it as a combination student pilot/medical certificate. AMEs are physicians with training in aviation medicine.

### **Step four: Your first solo**

Initially, all of your flight lessons will be aimed toward one goal: preparing you to fly by yourself for the first time. Your first solo flight will be a magical day that you'll always remember. Part of the excitement of your first solo is that you may or may not know exactly when it's going to happen. Usually, it starts off like any

other lesson: a few practice takeoffs and landings at your home airport, in your usual airplane. Then, when you're ready (don't worry, your instructor knows when you're ready), your instructor steps out of the airplane, instantly making you the pilot in command. One of the first things you'll notice: without the extra weight of the instructor on board, the airplane has a lot more get up and go!

Besides receiving the flight training listed in FAR 61.87, you'll also have to complete a presolo written test before your solo. This is a review, administered by your instructor, and then corrected to 100 percent. Here you'll demonstrate that you have satisfactory knowledge of the applicable sections of FAR parts 61 (certification of pilots) and 91 (general operating and flight rules), the airspace rules and procedures for the airport where your solo flight will take place, and the flight characteristics and operational limitations of the airplane you'll fly.

### **Step five: Cross-country work**

Until now, you've taken your airplane to the practice area and perhaps a few local airports. Now it's time to get out a little. A cross-country is essentially a flight with a landing at an airport more than 50 nautical miles away. It's in this phase of your training where things really get interesting.

This is when you'll explore beyond your local area and learn how to "work" an airplane. Cross-country flying teaches you how to utilize the airplane as a transportation tool, moving passengers, baggage, and cargo from one city to another.

In this stage, you'll learn how to navigate using aeronautical charts, dig into the pilot's operating handbook to determine airplane performance, check weather reports and forecasts, and file an FAA flight plan.

To learn these skills, you and your instructor first will fly a few dual cross-countries together. Then you'll make a few solo cross-countries, including one long cross-country flight of at least 150 nautical miles total distance, with full-stop landings at a minimum of three points.

### **Step six: Night flights**

Flying at night holds an awe and mystery of its own. The air is generally smoother, there's less traffic, and with the stars above and the lights below the views can be magnificent.

As during the day, you'll practice pilotage, which is the art of navigating visually by reference to landmarks on the Earth's surface. At night, good landmarks are roads, cities, coastlines, and airports. (An easy way to spot an airport at night is to look for its rotating beacon, which can be seen for miles.) You may practice a little bit of instrument work, where you'll use the flight instruments in addition to the natural horizon (which may be limited at night) to maintain the airplane's heading and altitude.

To fulfill the night requirements for the private pilot certificate, you'll need to make at least 10 night takeoffs and landings to a full stop and one night cross-country of more than 100 nautical miles total distance.

### **Step seven: The knowledge test**

Sometime before you take your checkride, you'll have to take an exam known in FAA parlance as the knowledge test (see "[Quiz Me](#)," page 32).



Although this test is a 60-question, comprehensive, multiple-choice type test, you've got a whopping two and one-half hours to complete it. Some people finish it in as little as 20 minutes. The minimum passing score is 70 percent, but in the rare event you don't pass it the first time, you can retake it after 30 days. Once you pass the knowledge test, the results are valid for two years.

### **Step eight: The checkride**

Your journey culminates with the checkride, formally known as the practical test. This is where everything you've learned comes together.

You'll probably take your checkride with a designated pilot examiner, or DPE, who is an experienced pilot authorized by the FAA to give checkrides and issue temporary pilot certificates until your permanent certificate arrives from the FAA.

The checkride is a well-understood, fair, and straightforward event, and should hold no surprises. In fact, the FAA publishes a complete guide on it, called the Practical Test Standards or PTS--there's a separate one for each pilot certificate and rating. It details every maneuver and every task you may be asked to perform, every area of knowledge you are expected to know about, and completion standards are provided. Use it as a training guide well before test time comes around.

You'll need to bring a few items with you on the day of your checkride. First, you'll need to supply the airplane, which is usually the one you've been training in, so it's as comfortable as your favorite pair of jeans. You'll also need to bring your identification, pilot and aircraft logbooks, knowledge test results, plotter, flight computer, reference books, charts, a view-limiting device or hood (which restricts your vision in order to demonstrate your instrument skills), and of course the examiner's fee.

The checkride consists of two parts, a ground portion and a flight portion. Typically, the ground portion consists of a review of your knowledge test results and some additional verbal quizzing. After a review of your preflight preparation, you'll head out to the airplane and go flying.

The flight portion of the checkride is where you show the examiner that you are the master of the aircraft, with the successful outcome of each task never seriously in doubt. The examiner will evaluate your flying to make sure you demonstrate proficiency and competency within the approved standards, that you are safe, and that you exercise sound judgment.

One of the more common problems students have during the checkride is purely psychological--they just aren't used to flying with anyone else but their instructor. To overcome this barrier, some flight instructors recommend that you take a phase check or mock checkride with an instructor you're not familiar with before your actual checkride. This helps to lessen anxiety and build confidence. The key is not to be intimidated by someone new, and to just fly the way you normally would.

### **The end of the road?**

While you're learning, don't get hung up on the number of training hours. Even though the regulations state that one can obtain a private pilot certificate in as few as 40 flight hours, the 2006 national average indicates most pilots require 60 to 75 hours. Instead of hours, focus on training to proficiency--that way you'll become a safe and competent pilot.

The road to a pilot certificate is challenging, exciting, interesting, and rewarding. You'll find that it is an amazing journey, one that will build self-confidence, give you a sense of accomplishment, and put a smile on your face. The end of the road? No--think of a pilot certificate as your entry to so many other opportunities in aviation.

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#### **Want to know more?**

Links to additional resources about the topics discussed in this article are available [at AOPA Flight Training Online](#).

### **Get off to a good start: Finding the information you need**



You're ready to begin flying lessons--congratulations! How do you get started?

The first step is to find a flight school.

Sit down at your computer and go to *AOPA Flight Training's* online [flight school directory](#). This comprehensive, regularly updated database lists more than 2,600 flight schools across the country.

*AOPA Flight Training Online* is a comprehensive resource for prospective new pilots, as well as those [already in training](#). It includes explanations of how an airplane and its primary components work, *AOPA Flight Training Online* is a comprehensive resource for prospective new pilots, as well as those [already in training](#). It includes explanations of how an airplane and its primary components work, descriptions of popular training aircraft, and additional suggestions to help you find the right flight school and instructor. What's it like to learn to fly?

[The site explains that, too.](#)

Look into the FAA's [medical certification requirements](#) for pilots before you get too far into your training. They are pretty straightforward, but a few extra steps may be required if certain conditions appear in your medical history. You must obtain an FAA airman medical certificate, which also serves as your student pilot certificate, before you can legally solo an aircraft as you progress toward a private pilot or recreational pilot certificate (a medical certificate is not required for sport pilot students). It would be frustrating if you're ready

Earning any pilot certificate requires you to pass a computerized test of your aviation knowledge, as well as an evaluation of your flying abilities (which includes a verbal examination). A ground school, whether completed at your local airport, a nearby community college, or at home using books or a DVD- or CD-based course, can help to prepare you for the knowledge test (see "[Quiz Me](#)," p. 32). Some instructors suggest that students complete that requirement first; we believe that you'll learn the material better if you study it during your flight training, because in many cases the materials reinforce each other.

to solo and find that your medical would be delayed because additional information was needed.

*Convenient links to all the Web sites mentioned in this magazine can be found [at AOPA Flight Training Online](#).*