

Flight Instructors and Karate Instructors

A friend recently attended a karate school in hopes of learning self defense. During her first one-hour lesson, the instructor spent more than 35 minutes doing relentless (and tedious) warmup exercises. Then he paired this first-hour student with a student taking only her second lesson. In the last 15 minutes of class, my friend worked on a few basic hand drills. Then the class dispersed.

My friend was so disappointed that she never went back. Can you blame her? Now, ask yourself what your experience was when you first walked into a flight school. All too likely it was similar to my friend's karate experience, except that you didn't get to punch any of the other flight instructors or students.

At the Great Lakes conference, I asked many of the attendees about their training experience (a question I've been asking pilots for many years). Guess what? Most had gone through (or around) several instructors on their road to a private pilot certificate. Many—most, in fact—felt they'd spent time (too much of it) and money (too much of it) with an instructor who was not a pick to click, and/or one who was clearly interested in being somewhere other than in the cockpit doing primary flight instruction.

So if you or anyone else you know is looking for a good instructor and quality flight training, here's what I suggest. Chat with students on the flight line, instructors, line people, mechanics, receptionists, schedulers and, most important, the local airport designated examiners. All these people have important information that helps separate the screechers from the true teachers. The designated flight examiners are the key, because they see the end result of each instructor's efforts. They know which instructors deliver students who are really ready to be pilots, and they hear who had a good time along the way and who suffered.

You may have to spend a fair amount of time pounding the pavement at the local airport and asking questions before narrowing your selection. In my opinion, it's better to spend three years looking for a good CFI than to spend even a single lesson with a bad one. A bad instructor can extinguish your zest for aviation in the length of a lesson. That is, in my book, a nearly criminal offense.

Why do so many students stay with a poor instructor despite the abuse they're receiving? Inertia is a powerful force. So is fear of the unknown (the next flight instructor). And for many students, it's the discomfort of saying they just don't feel that the CFI is *simpatico*.

Here's how to solve that problem. When you or anyone else you know begins flight training, commit to fly with an instructor for three lessons, no more. Let the instructor know that at the end of three lessons you'll evaluate the situation, with the understanding that while the instructor might be perfectly capable, there could be issues of teaching or personal style that make it best for you to keep looking. This arrangement gives you a socially comfortable way to maneuver out of an incompatible relationship so you can continue your search for the right instructor. That, in turn, increases the chances you will in fact become a licensed pilot.

Finding the right flight instructor is the key to success in flight training. You deserve the best, but you'll have to look for it.

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