

How to Find a Good Flight Instructor

Nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, is more important to a person's success at learning to fly than having a good flight instructor. Yes, there are many good flight instructors in the aviation business, just as there are many good doctors and lawyers in their respective businesses. Unfortunately, there are also individuals who don't represent their professions well. Sorry, but that's life in the big city (or big sky).

Unlike golf clubs and fancy cars, flight instruction is likely to be something a prospective pilot has never shopped for in his or her entire life. That's why most folks have nary a clue about what questions to ask (or even if they should ask questions) in order to winnow the instructor wheat from the chaff. Without the right information, lots of students wind up with chafe from the chaff, and people who should have been pilots become pedestrians.

I've assembled a list of questions that will help any prospective student (and that includes you if you're going back for advanced training). The objective is to try to spot someone who will be a good instructor. No single question is going to reveal all the strengths and weaknesses of an individual, but ask a variety of well-targeted questions and you'll learn a lot about someone.

Keep in mind that a good CFI is worth his or her weight in airplane parts. Once you find one, treat him or her well. Pay him what he's worth, and sing his praises to everyone. Good CFIs seldom get the credit they deserve.

1. Why did you become a flight instructor?

The reason you want to know this is because the person might talk only about flying professionally. Most likely, this is someone who is flying to build time. There's nothing wrong with this, of course, but if he doesn't talk about, mention, or even hint that he loves to fly and share flying with others, then I might be a bit concerned about him not having my best interests at heart.

2. What are the chances of your being hired by an airline or another aviation company in the next six months?

If she says that she's got a good chance of being hired by a commuter airline in the next six months, you know that there's a very good chance she won't be around long enough to see you through private training. If she says that hiring in the next half-year is unlikely, then the chances are good that she'll be around long enough to take you to the private pilot level.

On the other hand, I can't say enough about the influence a good flight instructor has on a student's initial development as a pilot. If this person is a gem with whom you're simpatico, then it's probably in your best interest to fly with this instructor, even for a few hours, despite him heading off for an airline job in the next few months. At least you'll have a taste of good flight training, which will make you a more educated consumer when shopping for instructors at a later time.

3. How many private pilots have you trained, and how many have passed their checkride on the first attempt?

If the person hasn't trained any private pilot students, then it's likely that he's either a new CFI or he doesn't prefer doing primary training. A new CFI is often very enthusiastic, and for this reason alone he could do a great job for you. Sure, he is new, but the possibility exists that he can at least teach you to fly as well as he can, right? That's a good thing. On the other hand, there's nothing wrong with looking for someone with experience, if that pleases you. I'd be worried if this person trains private pilots and has had

more than three out of 10 applicants fail on their first attempt. In this instance it might be wise to look for someone with an A or B+ or even a B average instead of a below-C average.

4. How many hours will it take for me to solo if I fly three times a week and learn in the simplest airplane available?

The answer to this question, even in a tower-controlled environment, varies but it should be around 14 to 18 hours. If you are told that it typically takes 25 hours or more to solo, then this should raise an eyebrow. It shouldn't take 25 hours or more to solo when flying frequently in a basic training airplane (assuming that you don't have any learning difficulties or personal struggles to cope with).

5. What is the average length of time and how many hours does it take your typical student who trains consistently to obtain a private pilot certificate?

The national average for the private certificate is around 70 hours, but there are instructors who can put people through in under 50 hours within a five-to-six-month period. Sure, weather, availability, training schedules, funds, and so on all affect this time, but if 70.1 hours is the average, then there are many students who complete their training in fewer hours. There's no reason you shouldn't be in this group. If the CFI says that his students who train consistently take 70-plus hours, then I'd check around for someone with more favorable numbers. If this person says that it takes about a year to obtain a private pilot certificate, then this isn't the person for you. Most people who fly consistently plan to spend no more than six months to complete private pilot training.

6. If we assume that I'm your typical student, and if we assume that I might have the problems of an average student, what areas of difficulty might I expect to encounter during flight training?

The response to this question will tell you a lot about this person's teaching personality. If he says that "most" students are lazy and don't work hard enough, then he is likely not a good manager or motivator. Most people who pay money for flight training aren't lazy and do indeed want to work hard. If the CFI tells you that "most" folks are afraid of stalls and emergency procedures, then this person may have difficulty assuaging the anxieties of his students. The fact is that most people aren't frightened of stalls and emergency procedures if their CFI is sensitive enough to introduce and explain them properly.

If the CFI says that it takes a long time to learn how to land, then you want to be suspicious here, too. It doesn't take a long time to learn how to land. In fact, given accommodating traffic and weather, a capable student can learn how to land in about four to six hours of pattern work. So use a bit of common sense here. If the CFI is emphatic about specific areas where his students struggle and have difficulties, then compare this with what other CFIs have told you. It's quite possible that this person has problems teaching in these areas. If the CFI says that most students have general challenges but these are nothing that can't be overcome, then that is the type of attitude you're looking for.

7. Tell me about your best and your worst students and why they became the best and worst.

This will tell you a lot about the CFI himself. It's a variation on question six, but it also can provide you with insights into what this CFI likes or dislikes in his students. If the instructor says that he likes students who understand if he loses patience or is late, then it's possible that he is a hothead and is late a lot. If this CFI says that he likes students who are serious about learning to fly, then he is probably serious about teaching, too. So listen carefully to his responses, and let your head and gut tell you whether this person is right for you.

8. How much ground instruction do you do on every lesson?

If the CFI says that he does very little ground instruction and suggests that the student's homework should cover this, keep looking. Good CFIs do both a preflight briefing and a postflight debriefing. That's ground

instruction. It's not unreasonable to have at least one hour's worth of ground instruction (which you'll rightly pay for, of course) for every two-to-2.5-hour lesson block.

9. May I speak with three of your previous private pilot students?

If he says no or makes it seem that such a thing wouldn't be possible unless a Ouija board is involved, consider flying with someone else. If he says yes, then interview these students or former students. Ask them about the quality of training they received. This provides an excellent window into the training style and capabilities of this individual. If the previous students suggest that this CFI has a problem with patience and tends to yell, then find another CFI.

Keep in mind that you're looking for specific trends in the answers given above. Stop, look, and listen carefully. You'll be surprised at what people reveal about themselves in what they say and what they omit from normal conversation. Finally, ask yourself if you'd like to spend 40-plus hours in the cockpit and under the supervision of this person while learning how to fly. Is this person the type of individual who seems like he will have confidence in you? If not, then find someone else. Remember, you're the consumer, so act like one. If you feel that this person is right for you, then agree to fly with him for no more than three lessons up front, after which time you'll commit to the rest of the training if the relationship is working out. At least this gives you a chance to escape with few hard feelings if you feel he isn't right for you.

One of the best ways to put this information to work immediately is by participating in AOPA Project Pilot, which pairs experienced pilots willing to act as Mentors with students actively engaged in flight training. This program is so powerful that AOPA statistics show that a student with a Project Pilot Mentor is three times more likely to successfully complete his or her flight training. That's why I'm such a big fan of AOPA's mentoring process and hope you'll find a way to participate.

So copy the question list and sign up for [AOPA Project Pilot](#). Help a prospective student find a good CFI and you'll be helping someone else, general aviation, and yourself.