

The Right Amount of Ground Instruction

Rod, thank you for your response, I'm sure you get way too much e-mail!

I know you're busy, and I don't expect a response to this, but want to run a thought by you. If you agree with this and if it's even appropriate for your column in AOPA, I would like to see your thoughts on the following. I'll try to be very brief.

It is a growing concern of mine that flight instructors I observe, do not spend proper ground time with students before jumping in the plane for a lesson (some spend no ground time at all). I believe that flying is taught on the GROUND. It's not fair to the student to introduce a concept in the plane with so much going on. I believe a lesson should consist of:

1. Preflight briefing (as much time as is necessary for that individual to grasp the concept of the maneuver or lesson).

2. The flight lesson.

3. Debrief.

Thanks for the consideration. Monte :)

Greetings Monte:

From the tone of your note it sounds like I'm not the only one that gets a lot of e-mail. I sincerely appreciate the considerate nature of your message.

You make an important point. Yes, ground time is absolutely essential to flight training. I can't imagine a student acquiring a pilot certificate without obtaining a reasonable amount of ground instruction in the process. How much ground instruction? That's a difficult question to answer precisely. It depends on many things. Nevertheless, ground training should accompany every flight lesson. If it didn't, I'd be very concerned about the quality of flight training I was receiving. Let's explore the issue a bit.

Knowing what I know now, if I were a beginning flight student, I'd insist on at least a two-hour block of instruction for each lesson. Approximately one hour would be used for the flight lesson with an additional hour for the pre- and postflight briefing. The flying and ground times are, of course, reasonably flexible within the two-hour block.

The first 30 to 40 minutes of this two-hour block are typically used for the preflight briefing. It takes this much time for the instructor to explain what he or she intends to accomplish on this lesson. Sure, this can occur at a faster pace, but not necessarily without a loss of comprehension on part of the student.

I've known instructors who, upon returning from a flight lesson, drop off one student and, while the engine is still running, wave another student into the airplane. The student and instructor accomplish their preflight briefing during the taxi-out and runup. On occasion they may discuss additional details of the lesson during takeoff and climbout (I'm not making this up, either).

Of course, everyone knows that the climbout isn't a critical time and is actually quite relaxing. In fact, I do my flight planning during the climbout. Why waste time planning my flight beforehand? After all, I've got a lot of e-mail to answer. In my roundabout, elliptical, nonlinear sort of way, I think you see that this paragraph is a joke. Even so, if this is how your instructor treats you, you need to have a serious talk with him or her. This isn't normal behavior nor should it be considered normal.

The idea that you, the student, can comprehend the essentials of a lesson over the sound of an engine is altogether silly. Flying skills are built on understanding the basic fundamentals of flight. The key word here is understanding. This takes a little time, a little concentration and a little effort on your part and on the part of your instructor. Skip the ground instruction and I'll guarantee you'll pay for it in frustration and reduced learning efficiency.

Remember, as a flight student, you are the consumer. You deserve an opportunity for quality training. But this won't happen unless you take an active role in your education. Flight training becomes a consumer driven activity when you teach your instructor how to teach you. If you need more ground time to comprehend a subject, then say so. If you

need less, say so. Working with the instructor to tailor your training is essential in creating a comfortable and enjoyable learning environment.

On the other hand, deserving the opportunity for quality flight training implies a willingness to pay for it. Scheduling an instructor for a two-hour block of time is reasonable if the instructor is paid for this amount of time (assuming, of course, that the instructor spent the time teaching and not telling stories). The idea of paying an instructor only for the time spent in the airplane is simply goofy. It makes no sense at all. Although this may explain why some instructors skimp on their pre- and postflight briefings. "Free the chain and fly the plane" makes economic sense to instructors who don't charge or who aren't paid for the time they spend on the ground with their students.

Think about the problem this way. Would you expect to pay a dentist only for the time spent drilling into your teeth? Would you expect to pay a tennis instructor only for the time spent swinging the racket, but not for the time he or she spent talking? Of course not. Why, then, should a student expect to pay an instructor only for the time spent in the airplane when the engine's running? One answer to this question is something known as tradition.

Although this is slowly changing, instructors have been reluctant to charge for their ground time. It's often not traditional for them to do so. Who knows? Maybe they have so much fun flying that they feel GUILTY charging for pre- and postflight briefings. Consequently, these instructors are less likely to spend extra time on the ground with you.

Remember, flight instructors have to eat too. Contrary to popular opinion, they don't live off the plant life in the air. And those that do, are probably too weak to physically crawl into the airplane unassisted.

In the movies, when James Cagney walks into a busy restaurant without a reservation, he gets a table by tipping the maitre d'. Of course, the maitre d' finds Cagney a table--or risks dying of lead poisoning. TIP means: To Insure Performance (the proper word here is ensure, not insure, but why ruin a perfectly good acronym?). In other words, once upon a time, a TIP was the bonus we paid before a service was rendered. This helped ensure the desired behavior (good service) before the meal took place.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you TIP your instructor. I'm suggesting that you ensure the reception of adequate ground instruction by paying for lesson blocks that are of sufficient duration. A two-hour lesson block is reasonable for most flight training situations. Higher ratings or complex lessons may require longer lesson blocks.

My friend and well-known Southern California flight instructor, Gene Hudson schedules three-hour lesson blocks between students. He spends approximately 2.5 hours with his student and charges for all that time if he actually uses that time. Here are Gene's thoughts in his own words:

"A typical lesson runs about 1.7 hours on the Hobbs meter and anywhere from 0.5 to 1.0 on the ground. I charge for ground time. I set expectations up front, with a conversation that goes something like this: "My rate is \$100 per hour--clock time, not flight time. It starts when you were supposed to have been there and ends when we shake hands goodbye in the lobby." However, if I allow myself to get distracted into telling a 'war story,' I deduct for that. I don't charge for 'war stories.'"

Wait! Before you run off thinking I'm crazy, hear me out.

It's to your benefit that instructors are paid for all the time they spend with you. I'm not saying that money should be the only motivator governing a flight instructor's behavior. I am saying that the lack of fair and sufficient compensation doesn't increase the likelihood that your instructor will spend the ground time necessary to meet your needs.

Paying for ground instruction and scheduling lessons in two-hour blocks makes sense in the long run. It's likely that, overall, you'll pay less for your flight training as well as reduce the length of time it takes to obtain a pilot certificate. I don't make this statement casually. I know it to be an accurate, honest assessment of the flight training process.

So here's the plan. If flight training isn't working out for you or if you want to try improving your "learning" performance, have a talk with your instructor. Schedule a two-hour lesson block and offer to pay for both the flight and ground training (not jokes and stories). Insist on receiving ground training before and after each lesson. If possible, schedule the airplane 15 to 30 minutes before your instructor is scheduled to arrive. Show up early and preflight the airplane (of course, this assumes that your FBO has enough airplanes and that the one you want isn't being used prior to your lesson. You're smart enough to figure out the pros and cons of doing this). Why waste your instructor's time having

him or her watch you do a preflight when you know how to do this? Now, you and the instructor can jump directly into the lesson with less distraction.

I hope this helps.

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