

Ask the CFI

What does the phrase “clear of the active” mean at a non-towered airport?

I cringe when I hear the phrase “clear of the active” used over the CTAF at non-towered airports because the term “active” is totally meaningless; all runways are potentially active at a non-towered field.

One of the advantages of non-towered airports is that pilots can opt to use any of the available runways, regardless of wind direction. And yes, that means they can land with a sporty crosswind or a howling tailwind if they so choose, and as long as they are able to stop before they run off the end of the runway, no one cares.

When the winds are calm pilots may take off from either end of a runway or for the sake of convenience simply choose the runway closest to their hangar. Some days the elements present us with a unique opportunity to practice crosswind takeoffs and landings while other pilots are using the runway aligned with the winds. Some pilots prefer to use grass runways where they exist and conditions are suitable, and flight instructors can opt for the grass for soft-field training or because the winds are more favorable for that runway.

The point is that just because you don't see anyone else using other runways at any given moment doesn't mean they are not active.

What surprises me about this practice is that after fastidiously making explicit downwind, base and final radio calls identifying a specific runway, why then would anyone abandon use of those very same runway numbers and make such a vague announcement on the ground? It is not any quicker to say “the active” than any two numbers for the runway. Just so everyone is clear, you won't find the phrase “clear of the active” mentioned anywhere in the FAA Pilot/Controller glossary and it is not sanctioned by the FAA.

While we are on the topic of transmitting clear of runways, when you make that call are you completely sure you are clear of all the runways? It is common for even small airports to have intersecting runways and I frequently see pilots exit one runway only to stop on another one and make that all too familiar call that they are “clear of the active,” all the while being oblivious to the potential for traffic landing or taking off on the runway where they are now sitting.

Sometimes pilots pick up poor habits because they see or hear other pilots doing them and the frequency of use may unwittingly imply legitimacy. But even common practices are not always correct or safe and this is one of them.

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Another useless transmission (used less frequently these days) is the phrase “any traffic in the area, please advise.” This is another radio call that is not recognized or accepted by the FAA and should absolutely never be used in any situation. If you think about it, this call doesn’t make any sense because usually no one responds (as they are not required to) and the pilot requesting the information is therefore no wiser as to whether there is traffic in their vicinity or not.

When I hear that question on the frequency I always wonder if the pilot is actually looking out the window for other traffic or whether they are only relying on other pilots responding to identify potential conflicts. Of course the correct procedure is to actually listen to the CTAF frequency to identify any radio-equipped traffic in the traffic pattern and continually scan the area for non-radio traffic.

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Self-announce transmissions may include aircraft type to aid in identification and detection. Paint schemes and color or style descriptions may be added to the use of the aircraft call sign and type, but should not replace type or call sign. For example, “MIDWEST TRAFFIC, TWIN COMMANDER FIVE ONE ROMEO FOXTROT TEN MILES NORTHEAST” or “MIDWEST TRAFFIC, FIVE ONE ROMEO FOXTROT TWIN COMMANDER TEN MILES NORTHEAST.” In some cases, where the type of aircraft may not be familiar to pilots, the color and description may be added to the type and call sign. For instance, “MIDWEST TRAFFIC, EXPERIMENTAL SKYBOLT NOVEMBER THREE TWO DELTA SIERRA, ORANGE AND WHITE BIPLANE TEN MILES NORTHEAST.” When referring to a specific runway, pilots should use the runway number and not use the phrase “Active Runway,” because there is no official active runway at a non-towered airport. To help identify one airport from another when sharing the same frequency, the airport name should be spoken at the beginning and end of each self-announce transmission.

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Note: Pilots are reminded that the use of the phrase, “ANY TRAFFIC IN THE AREA, PLEASE ADVISE,” is not a recognized self-announce position and/or intention phrase and should not be used under any condition. Any traffic that is present at the time of your self-announcement that is capable of radio communications should reply without being prompted to do so.