

Ask the CFI

What should a private pilot student look for in a flight instructor?

Finding a good flight instructor is much like the age old challenge of finding a good doctor; it's difficult to know what to look for when you don't know anything about that field of expertise. Just like doctors, flight instructors all have passed the same exams but that doesn't necessarily mean they are all equally proficient.

It's not simply a matter of experience either. Some 300-hour CFI's are excellent pilots and teachers, and conversely there are those with many thousands of hours who have a limited ability to fly or teach well.

Motivation can influence quality of instruction too. Many CFI's teach as a stepping stone to getting hired by an airline or cargo carrier. This is a normal part of the aviation industry and doesn't necessarily make them bad instructors. This is perfectly acceptable for CFI's who themselves received excellent training, are committed to teaching, and work in a flight school environment where they have adequate guidance and supervision from more experienced instructors.

There are some very important reasons to find a responsible and talented instructor, but the most critical reason is your safety. There are risks involved in piloting an aircraft and CFI's are not immune to those risks. While rare, accidents during flight instruction can and do happen and can result in serious injury or even death. Your life is literally in your flight instructor's hands and they should take that responsibility very seriously.

If you are looking for a flight instructor or have concerns about your current CFI here are my thoughts on how to ensure you are receiving safe and adequate instruction.

Qualifications

Don't be shy about validating your CFI's credentials. Ask them how many total flight hours they have and how long they have been instructing. Make sure they have a current FAA medical (or BasicMed) and a *valid* flight instructor's certificate. These certificates are issued by the FAA and expire after two years if not renewed. Do not fly with a CFI who's certificate has expired—your training will not be valid. Your instructor should always be able to produce these documents because they are required to carry their credentials with them while they are instructing.

Safety

Safety must be your instructor's first priority at all times. As a student (at least initially) you will not know what is safe and what isn't, and you will therefore need to defer to your CFI to make decisions about each lesson. So how will you know if they are making good decisions and putting safety first? This is a very difficult question to answer because there are so many variables involved, but there are a few things you can look out for.

- Flight instructors should NEVER deliberately shock or scare a student—it is not funny or clever and this is not part of any legitimate training technique. There should be no aerobatics unless you specifically signed up for that training in an aerobatic aircraft.
- You should never be training in severe weather conditions such as thunderstorms, poor visibility, icing or strong winds.
- Your CFI should never ignore maintenance issues.
- Checklists are NOT optional; CFI's and experienced pilots as well as students must use them consistently.

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- Your instructor should use conservative fuel management practices. It is not normal or acceptable to land with almost empty fuel tanks under any circumstances.
- If you regularly feel unsafe during your lessons you need to find a new instructor.

Attitude

Your flight instructor should always act professionally, be respectful, and never berate you for doing anything incorrectly. They must be focused on you for the entire lesson, not posting on social media, checking their email, or texting their friends. Good quality flight instruction requires an immense amount of patience and excellent communication skills.

Preparation

Flight training covers a wide range of knowledge and skills and requires many hours of studying—there are no shortcuts. Your school or instructor should give you a list of books to read and homework for each lesson.

Your flight lessons should never begin with the phrase “well, what do you want to work on today!” Your flight instructor should be properly prepared for each lesson and make sure you are properly prepared as well.

Every lesson must include pre- and post-flight discussions, on the ground, and preferably in a classroom type setting (not the airplane). Before each flight, at a minimum you should review the weather, perform a risk assessment, and your CFI should explain what will be included in the lesson.

Each lesson must conclude with a post flight debrief covering what went well, what areas need improvement and a chance to ask questions. You should never leave a lesson not knowing whether or not you met the required standards for that lesson or how you should prepare for the next lesson. Your CFI is required to log your flight and ground training in your personal logbook and a good school or instructor will keep a written or digital record of your training events as well.

Syllabus

Competent flight training should always follow a formal (documented) syllabus and you should generally expect to learn something new during each lesson. Sometimes it will take more than one lesson to perfect a technique or maneuver, but once you attain the required level of ability you should move on to the next lesson.

Progress

A key reason for following a syllabus is to track your progress towards your end goal. Not everyone is cut out to be a pilot, but most students putting in an appropriate amount of effort and provided adequate instruction will ultimately be successful.

If you are flying regularly and making an appropriate effort with the study materials but you are not really progressing through the syllabus, it may not be a lack of aptitude on your part. It could just as easily be due to inferior flight instruction. Don't give up—find a new instructor.

Questions

Students should have plenty of opportunities to ask questions before, during and after lessons but bear in mind your instructor may not immediately have all the answers. That is normal. However, a good instructor will do some research and find an answer for you if the question is within the scope of your training.

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SPEAK UP if you have questions or concerns about the quality of your flight instruction. You should not tolerate rudeness, a bad attitude, unsafe practices, or substandard training. If you don't feel comfortable discussing the problems with your CFI, talk to their manager/supervisor, another instructor, another pilot or another flight school. If you have serious safety concerns, find a new CFI immediately. You can also report safety issues to the FAA Hotline at the following link: https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/aae/programs_services/faa_hotlines

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