



# Preventing the Pink Slip

10 reasons students fail checkrides

BY MAL WOODCOCK, MCFI

One of the proudest moments in my instructing career was the day I became a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) designated pilot examiner (DPE). To this day, when I read the wording on my certificate of designation, I get awestruck by the responsibility and privilege bestowed on me.

Sadly, when it came to my first outing as an examiner, I was compelled to issue my first notice of disapproval. Not the best start to my examining career. Although I was literally sick to my stomach, I knew that I had done my job in

representing the FAA fairly and in the interest of safety.

Statistically, around one in five applicants receives a so-called pink slip, and although it's only human nature to feel disappointed by failure, it's not the end of the world. The DPE is the last person in a quality-control process. It all starts with you, the instructor, who has the awesome task of imparting knowledge and skill to an acceptable standard with the ultimate goal of preparing a safe, proficient pilot. But when I find an area of deficiency, I am doing everyone—the applicant, the CFI, the pilot's family members and friends, and gen-

eral aviation at large—a favor by highlighting it now. Again, it's all about safety.

Still, students—and even some instructors—often harbor the misconception that DPEs will mercilessly dig at any area of weakness, as if we are just itching to fail the applicant. That couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, as a DPE, I will work as hard as I'm allowed to ascertain whether or not the applicant meets the applicable standard. If the applicant is struggling with a particular area during the ground portion, I will try to approach the subject from a different angle by asking additional



JIM KOEPNICK

he get off to a bad start? Each applicant should have devoured his copy of the applicable practical test standard (PTS), and I certainly confirm his familiarity with it at the time I make the appointment. It should therefore come as no surprise that most DPEs are going to start at the beginning of the PTS. For example, if a private pilot applicant doesn't know about the requirement for a flight review (Area of Operation I, Task A, Subpart 1), this checkride is probably not going to have a happy ending.

**2. Knowing the procedure.** "There's a correct procedure for that?" Yep. I've heard that one before. Literally everything your applicant needs to know can be

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ver, as well as the acceptable standard of performance. Not knowing the procedure for each and every task is a dangerous strategy. Rest assured that I know it blindfolded and backward.

**3. DPE intervention.** The introductory section of any PTS provides a list of typical areas of unsatisfactory performance and grounds for disqualification. Topping my list has to be any intervention I must make to maintain safe flight. I want to go home at the end of the day, too. I can intervene in several ways, from physically taking over the controls—that's a no-brainer—to having to say something to correct an overlooked unsafe situation. One of my applicants was just about to go

over the hold-short lines at a controlled airport without a clearance. As soon as I said "You can stop now," the ride was over.

**4. Positive aircraft control.** This is a broad subject, but in simple terms I want the applicant to show me that he is a pilot, not a passenger. It doesn't necessarily have to be pretty, but

the aircraft has to remain under the control of the applicant throughout the flight. Simply put, I want to see the applicant demonstrate mastery of the aircraft from startup to shutdown.

When it comes to landings, I am sometimes surprised by how many applicants get presented to me without their truly grasping the concept of a safe, smooth landing. I'm not looking for greasers, but I do expect to land on the hind legs (as I call them), pointing straight, with no drift, and with the main wheels straddling the centerline. But the applicant isn't done yet. He should continue to fly the aircraft until he comes to a stop. Too

questions. I'm certainly not going to teach or spoon-feed him, but I can tell the difference between deficiency and nerves.

Although the reasons for possible failures are wide and varied, I have observed a couple of issues that come up time and time again. When it comes to checkride success—and failure—these are suggestions to fly by.

**1. Getting off to a good start.** It sounds simple enough, but getting those first few questions dead-on correct sets the stage for a good practical test. If, on the other hand, the applicant struggles from the get-go, he will have to dig deep to recover. But why should

found in the myriad of references in the front of any PTS. My favorites include the *Airplane Flying Handbook* and the *Instrument Flying Handbook*. If you want to know what I will expect, chances are it will be in one of these books or actually stated in the PTS itself. A classic case would be stalls. I don't know how many times I have asked for a particular kind of stall only to be taken for the most unrealistic ride of my life. In particular, I cringe when I ask for a turning stall and the applicant says, "My instructor never taught me that." If she had read the PTS carefully, she would see that it clearly states the sequence to set up the maneu-

many applicants “give up” the second the wheels touch the ground, which is too dangerous to ignore.

Another one of my pet peeves is coordination. For the applicant, keeping the aircraft coordinated throughout *all* phases of flight should be like blinking and breathing. It should happen automatically. Remember that powerful law of learning, “primacy”? You need to emphasize from the first lesson on the importance of good stick-and-rudder skills. I have my students work on these primarily by looking outside and interpreting the swing of the nose, rather than by only looking at the inclinometer. As a DPE, if I’ve felt centered in my seat throughout the climbs, turns, power changes, and descents, I go into the stalls feeling quietly confident.

#### **5. Collision avoidance.**

I probably mention clearing turns and collision avoidance three or four times during my preflight briefing. I also recommend to the applicant that if she is looking for traffic, she should say so. Remember, I need to feel that she understands the important reality that aircraft and aircraft don’t mix. She needs to keep her head on a swivel and make it obvious.

However, under the pressure to perform, it’s amazing how many applicants will get tunnel vision and forget to clear the area prior to commencing the “air work.” It’s a safety violation that I have no tolerance for. Again, you should set the example from lesson one by raising or lowering the wing before turns and by teaching the virtues of a good clearing turn.

**6. Making a mistake and not fixing it.** Contrary to what the applicant might think, not all mistakes will result in a pink slip. In fact, sometimes, after an error occurs, I relish the opportunity to observe the

applicant’s judgment and decision making and see how he remedies an error that I did not manufacture. This is golden to an examiner, and it truly boosts my confidence in the applicant’s skills to secure a safe outcome. I would rather an applicant stop a maneuver—as long as it is done quickly and early enough—and set it up again rather than attempt to complete a maneuver that was doomed from the beginning. That said, I wouldn’t expect a qualified applicant to do this for every task on the checkride.

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**7. “Where can you go?”** This is a classic shortcoming I see on the instrument-rating checkride. Instrument flying is rather matter-of-fact. It’s either done correctly or it isn’t, and there’s little tolerance for deviation. For example, the procedure-turn barb indicates the turn should be on one side, and that’s the side I expect the pilot to turn. Simple enough. I also expect him to double-check that he has his OBS set correctly. That centered needle might look great, but if it’s taking him to the wrong spot, that could spell disaster. Remember that

I have to assume he is in a non-radar environment with unfriendly terrain lurking out there. Maintaining a heightened level of situational awareness is critical to preventing controlled flight into terrain (CFIT) accidents from happening.

#### **8. “How low can you go?”**

Once again, this usually appears on the instrument-rating checkride. During the preflight briefing, I discuss precisely when I expect the applicant to remove her view-limiting device. I will say, “You have broken out.” If I *don’t* say those magic words and we arrive at the missed-approach point, I do not expect any hesitation in executing the missed-approach procedure, and I certainly don’t expect a continuation of our descent. The pilot needs to be careful to brief me on when she decides to leave her minimum descent altitude (MDA), especially during the circle-to-land task. With a zero “minus” tolerance on altitude, I encourage each applicant to state clearly that she is “leaving their MDA” to conduct a normal approach.

**9. Airspace.** This is a subject that challenges all new students, but for the applicant, trying to blab his way through it on a checkride is not the thing to do. I use a cross-country scenario to test my applicant on his airspace knowledge, and it can uncover alarming deficiencies. In this day and age, it is critical to have a firm understanding of all conventional and special-use airspace. If I ask about a temporary flight restriction or TFR and I hear “what’s a TFR?” we’re probably not going flying that day.

On the other hand, if the applicant has made it to the flight portion and is teetering near some controlled airspace that requires his participation, he should be sure to give plenty of room and brief me on his intentions. I am not al-

lowed to let you break any regulation, and I will intervene prior to an airspace incursion.

**10. “Whether you like it, or weather you don’t.”** The applicant should remember that I was a student pilot once, too. I had a tricky time getting my head around the various weather products and the information pouring out of a fast-talking flight service station (FSS) weather briefer. However, she should also know that many of the PTS detail exactly which weather products shall be tested during the checkride.

Needless to say, she should bring those weather products with her and be prepared to explain how she used them to make a go/no-go decision concerning her cross-country flight. She shouldn’t wait until the week before her checkride to start learning the various weather charts. Instead, she should come to grips with them early in her training by looking outside the window and seeing how her local weather relates to the charts.

Lastly, there are some great websites

available now for planning flights and procuring weather information. She may use them as a supplement, but she shouldn’t forget to receive a briefing from an actual FSS weather briefer. FSS is still the “primary” source of pre-flight weather briefings.

Remember that, as your applicant’s DPE, I am only human, and perfection is not my standard. Sure, I’m looking for a knowledgeable and proficient applicant, but, above all, I want to see safe flying and sound judgment. Make sure your applicant has read and thoroughly understood the PTS, including the introduction section; therein lie great information and hints about passing. And make sure he thoroughly understands the “special emphasis areas.” These are areas that, should he show any amount of deficiency, will be grounds for disapproval. Lastly, remind your applicant to try to relax and have fun. We are not allowed to teach, but normally at some stage during a checkride the applicant will learn something from me.

*NAFI Master Instructor Mal Woodcock is a designated pilot examiner and chief instructor at Gulf Coast Flight Training Center, a Part-141 Cessna pilot center at Ocean Springs Airport in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. He is a member of the Civil Air Patrol’s Mississippi Wing and serves as a FAA Team representative for the FAA’s Jackson flight standards district office.* ■

### Calming the Nerves

Ask any DPE and he will probably tell you that one of the hardest parts about administering a checkride is getting the applicant to relax. Even when I examine one of the students from my own school, I spend a considerable amount of time reminding her that I haven’t grown horns overnight. One tactic I recommend is for the applicant and I to visit a few days ahead of time. I enjoy meeting with budding aviators away from the checkride in an informal environment, and I get a chance to provide some tips—which, hopefully, puts them at ease—as well as convincing them that I am, in fact, human.