

What Do Applicants Actually Fail?

When DPEs fail an applicant we have to specifically list the area of operation and task in which the applicant failed to meet the standards. I often get asked, “Hey, what do you fail applicants on?” When applicants ask me that question they are trying to find out what in the Airman Certification Standards (ACS) I’m really hot over. When it’s an instructor he or she is hopefully trying to find areas in which to improve his or her instructional skills. With this concept of failing a specific task in mind, our editor, David Hipschman, suggested I write about those specific things. No wishy-washy stuff; what do applicants actually fail on?

I keep all the paperwork for checkrides for about two years. Over the past 23 months I have done 157 checkrides, almost all of them for private pilot. Of the 25 (16 percent) who failed, 14 (56 percent) failed in the oral, and the other 11 (44 percent) in the flight. National airspace system was the No. 1 cause of failure in the oral, closely followed by airworthiness. For the flight portion, takeoffs and landings were No. 1, mostly short field. I understand that my isolated personal experience is not statistically

valid for all DPEs, but I provide the data to give you an overview of my outcomes here in southern Indiana.

Even though it is necessary to satisfactorily complete the oral portion before the flight can begin, I’ll start with things that happen during the flight portion. Where I can I’ll tell you why I think those failures occurred, and what you, the flight instructor, might do to prevent them in the future.

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Failures in Flight

Not using a checklist for the pre-flight inspection: When an applicant fails to use a checklist, at least right at the end, and tells me the airplane is fine and we can go, we never get in the plane. Any would-be pilot that thinks he/she is so good that a checklist isn’t necessary isn’t ready to fly with passengers. What I usually find out is that during training and checkride prep, the instructor never went out and watched the student do the preflight inspection after the original training.

Taxi across a hold-short line without stopping: I will not accept excuses like “The paint is all but faded away” (but the big red and white runway sign



By Larry Bothe

My hope is that you will read these failure causes and perhaps adjust your teaching technique a bit to prevent your students from being a part of the 15 percent who do fail on the first try.



is right there!), or “I was looking for the run-up parking area (many airports, including my home field, don’t have them). We’re done. Would you like to continue the test, or go home? The way to avoid this sort of error is for the instructor to go with the student to the airport where the practical test will be conducted. Then the CFI can point out any new situations, and the applicant will be prepared to deal with them.

Not doing an engine run-up: Not often, but it happens. An applicant is so nervous about actually having to fly with a stranger who is going to evaluate him that he skips whole sections of the checklist. I don’t know how to deal with this one. I have a reputation in my area of being able to put nervous applicants at ease, but I’m not always completely successful.

Taking off downwind: Sometimes applicants will become confused about which way is into the wind; either from the windsock or tee or from an AWOS broadcast. Then they taxi to the wrong

runway. I don’t say anything at that point because we give applicants the time and opportunity to correct an error, provided that nothing unsafe is happening at the moment. I’ll sit through the pre-takeoff checklist and the run-up at the wrong end of the runway, and if there is no other traffic, let applicants pull out onto the runway. But if applicants haven’t figured it out and open the throttle for takeoff, they fail. When I’m teaching, from the very beginning I get the student to determine which runway we should use. I never get in the plane and tell the student to taxi to a specific runway. Students who learn at towered fields are more likely to make this mistake because ATIS and/or the ground controller always tells them which runway to use.

Not using proper crosswind control techniques when taking off in a crosswind: If a significant crosswind is present, I expect the applicant to use proper control inputs, and I am not going to ask for a crosswind takeoff. By the time students have finished training and

come to a DPE to be tested they should be aware of wind and know what to do about it, without prompting. Not having wind awareness and/or not knowing what procedure to follow is cause for failure. I teach students that each time they pull out onto the runway they must ask themselves, “Where is the wind coming from, how will it affect my airplane and what must I do to compensate for that?” Then position the controls appropriately and take off.

Making a right turn in a left-hand pattern: At a nontowered field with a standard left-hand traffic pattern, if applicants take off, climb a few hundred feet and then roll into a right turn, they fail. Not safe. You can’t turn right until you have exited the pattern. There are several ways to properly exit a traffic pattern, but simply turning right (at low altitude) isn’t one of them. I see this error most often when an applicant has done essentially all of her training at a towered field and is used to the tower approving an on-course heading once airborne.

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Climbing into a cloud: For the flight portion of the test I like to start out by flying some of the cross-country the applicant planned. During the oral we discussed the flight planning so I know at what altitude the applicant intends to fly. A problem comes up when a cloud layer forms lower than the applicant's planned cruising altitude. The applicant is sometimes so intent on flying at the planned altitude that he will fly right through a cloud to get there. And this is after telling me about cloud clearance requirements about an hour before. If you touch a cloud while doing a checkride with me, you're done. This is a classic example of knowing the rule but having no idea how to apply it in the real world.

Flying into restricted airspace: Back in the bad old days, before GPS became ubiquitous, it was not uncommon for an applicant to make a VOR navigation error and then get lost. We don't fail applicants right away for nav errors; we give them time to sort it out. But if in the process of sorting it out (wandering around?) they fly me up to the edge of restricted airspace, and I have to say or do something to prevent entering, they fail. The same thing would apply to classes B, C and D, but I'm not usually examining near those airspaces. Now that we have GPS in some form in nearly all airplanes I don't see the lost/airspace error very often.

Not doing clearing turns: During the preflight briefing I remind the applicant about the need to do clearing turns before any substantial or abrupt maneuvering. After the cross-country navigation task is completed I tell the applicant that now we will do the required "high" private pilot maneuvers. Then I ask her to start with a steep turn to the left. If she just rolls into the turn without doing a clearing turn first, she fails. She does not have sufficient awareness of risk and safety requirements. If instructors make their students do clearing turns every time, then they will do them for me. If the instructor blows them off, so will the student, and she will fail.

Not knowing how to do a required maneuver: Once in a while, when I ask an applicant to demonstrate an emergency descent, the applicant begins to show me engine failure. I explain that the emergency descent is a completely different maneuver from engine failure, and ask him to please demonstrate the emergency descent. Then the applicant concedes that he never heard of emergency descent, and he fails. This sort of thing sometimes happens when a person who used to instruct comes out of retirement to teach a single student, say a grandchild. The instructor is legally current to instruct, but is not really up to speed with current requirements.

Not being able to do a slip to a landing: I suppose this failure is related to the not being able to do a required maneuver, discussed above, but I think the cause is different. The slip is a required maneuver prior to solo, so it was likely taught to the student at one time. The problem arises when it is never reviewed. For whatever reason (I'm guilty, too), slips seem to be at the end of everybody's list, and the lesson time runs out without getting around to them. Same thing happens during checkride prep. But on the checkride, DPEs are not allowed to skip anything, so we ask for a slip. It might be right at the end, but we ask. If the applicant can't do a creditable slip, she fails. As an instructor, make time for slips.

Landing on the wrong runway: Wrong runway can be either downwind, or the applicant saying he will land on one runway and then actually landing on another. I of course know the applicant is making the mistake as soon as he enters the pattern, but I don't say anything. I'll let it continue (in hopes the applicant will see the error and fix it) until it approaches being unsafe, or until touchdown. If the applicant tells me he is landing on Runway 5 at my home field, but actually touches down on Runway 32, he fails. As in the takeoff runway error discussed above, if you always make your students decide where to land, and sort out which piece of pavement and





direction that is, then they will be able to do it correctly for themselves, for the checkride and into the future.

Botched short-field landing; no go-around: During the preflight briefing I always tell applicants they should fly in the practical test the same way they would in the real world of everyday flying. I specifically mention that in the case of a bad landing setup, they should exercise good judgment and go around. If, during the short-field landing demonstration, the applicant comes up way too high, but instead of going around forces the plane onto the ground 500 or 700 feet past the selected touchdown point, he fails. He has shown me that he can't do short-field landings, and on top of that, he has exceedingly bad judgment. And by the way, the most common reason for a botched short-field landing is skipping the first element, which is going further downwind than normal.

Failures in the Oral Portion

I started with the things that cause failure in the flight portion in part because the ACS for the flight are relatively objective and straightforward. It's different when evaluating answers in an oral questioning format. Is the answer complete or incomplete? Partially correct? Close enough? It's often not easy to determine if an answer is satisfactory. Yes, we can ask follow-up questions, but then it is difficult to avoid leading the applicant to the answer. With these considerations in mind, here are some areas of the oral portion where applicants get into trouble.

Airworthiness: Specifically, not understanding the concept of required equipment versus optional equipment. Since the average age of airplanes in the general aviation fleet is about 30 years, equipment failures are quite common. New pilots need to know what to do when things break. The way to teach it, after explaining required and optional, is to tell your student that when some-

thing doesn't work, there are always two choices. First, you must determine if the malfunctioning item is required or optional. FAR 91.205 and/or the equipment list in the POH will tell the tale. If it's required, you have two choices. You can have it repaired right there, or you can get a ferry permit to fly the plane to a place where it can be fixed. If it's optional, you have two choices. You can either placard the item inoperative ("INOP") or remove it from the aircraft.

Weather: Weather is a difficult topic for a lot of people. DPEs are required to determine that applicants know about various sources of weather, which reports or forecasts provide the information needed, and how to interpret and apply the information to the flight they planned. The applicant has to know the different common weather reports and forecasts. She has to know which ones are historic in nature, and which ones endeavor to predict the future. If I ask how the applicant will know what the weather will be at XYZ airport when we get there several hours from now, and she tells

me she will consult the METARs, or if I ask about en route weather and am told that she will tune a nearby ATIS, I soon come to the conclusion that she has no understanding of how to obtain and use weather information. Failure is likely.

National airspace system: Applicants are expected to know about the various classes of airspace and the associated requirements, limitations and risks. They also must know about special use airspace, special flight rules areas and TFRs. Applicants usually know about the major classes, except they sometimes struggle with where classes E and G are located. MOAs and restricted areas are often confused, and I get told that it's OK to fly in an MOA, but you have to call first, and that you can't fly in a restricted area. Airspace is admittedly complicated and somewhat confusing; flubbing a few minor details along the way is OK. But if I get a string of wrong answers, like not knowing about the location of E and G, and not understanding how to deal with MOAs and restricted areas, I then conclude that the applicant has insufficient



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knowledge of airspace and will need to learn more about it. CFIs, when you're teaching airspace, the answer to "Can you fly in an MOA?" is yes. "Do you have to call anybody?" No. Same questions for restricted areas: Maybe, and then yes to determine if it is active. The call is to the controlling agency; the name and frequency come from the frequency tab on the sectional chart. And I'll tell you right here, applicants who have never heard of special flight rules areas fail on the spot. Lack of airspace knowledge is my No. 1 cause for checkride failure.

Performance and limitations: Applicants are required to know how to use the performance charts for the airplane they brought for the checkride. I ask, "How much fuel will you burn on our flight to XYZ?" They give me a number (of gallons). Then I ask, "What did you use for gph, TAS and power setting?" If I get really even numbers, like 10 gph and 110 knots, I'm pretty sure they didn't consult the cruise performance chart. Then I ask them to show me where the data comes from. If I get, "Well, my instructor told me to use those numbers," then I ask where the instructor got it. If applicants don't know about cruise performance, and think one size fits all, they fail. Make sure your students look in cruise performance to determine the data for the flight they have planned for the checkride; the DPE will be looking for it. On a related note, we ask applicants to do a weight and balance (W&B) as homework, as part of their flight planning. I generally look at the W&B for reasonableness, and then ask applicants to accommodate a small change, like an additional passenger. If they can't do it, they fail. What I find out is that the instructor did the assigned W&B for the student, and then hoped I wouldn't check. No such luck!

Human factors: I actually failed an applicant recently over lack of human factors knowledge. I asked about three of the 11 things in the listing in the ACS, and he was unable to have a discussion about any of them. Not acceptable. It

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turned out that by the time the instructor and the applicant got around to human factors in the flight test prep, it was late, and the instructor asked something like, "You know about human factors, right?" The student of course replied in the affirmative, because he was embarrassed to admit otherwise, and besides, it was late. CFIs, never ask your students if they know or remember something, because the answer will invariably be some form of yes. Instead make them demonstrate that they know or can do the thing you are asking about. "You remember how to do slips, right?" Yeah, sure you do!

Spin awareness: The wording in the ACS may be a bit different than in the old PTS, but basically applicants have to know three things about spins: what causes an airplane to spin, under what circumstances inadvertent spins occur and how to get out of a spin. Since spins are tested only verbally (for private pilot), the applicant shouldn't have any trouble with the answers — a stall during uncoordinated flight, base-to-final turn in an overshoot and perform the control inputs as indicated by using the acronym PARE. Because we don't fail applicants for trivial reasons, if they can get close to the correct answers it's OK, but not being able to speak to any of those three things is definitely cause for failure. Just like slips and human factors, don't blow off spins because they are near the bottom of your list and it's late in the day. Remember, all these things will be tested, because DPEs are not permitted to skip anything in the ACS.

I have just written many words about failure. You might take it from this article that nearly everybody who comes to me for a checkride fails, at least on the first try. I'm glad to tell you that certainly is not the case. I gave you my pass/fail stats at the beginning, and they are in line with national averages. I wrote this article so I could share with you the specific reasons that applicants fail, not to impress you with what a tough guy I am. My hope is that you will read these failure causes and perhaps adjust your teaching technique a bit to prevent your students from being a part of the 15 percent who do fail on the first try. 🇺🇸

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