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INSTRUCTOR REPORT: PEEVED

10 THINGS FLIGHT INSTRUCTORS DO THAT DRIVE STUDENTS CRAZY

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By Marco Turco

As a student wobbling through the joy and pain of learning to fly, I could relate to all the mistakes I must make that cause my instructor deep reflection on the sanity of student pilots. Yet students have their frustrations with instructors, too (see: “10 Things Student Pilots Do Wrong” and “Advanced Pilot: Don’t Do This, Either,” January 2018 Flight Training). In talking to other students, both those at the college level and those of us considered mature students, I’ve learned there are a host of things that flight instructors do that drive students crazy. These behaviors can discourage students and drive them away from an instructor—or from flying altogether. With student retention a serious concern at most flight schools, it may be prudent to listen to what students are complaining about.

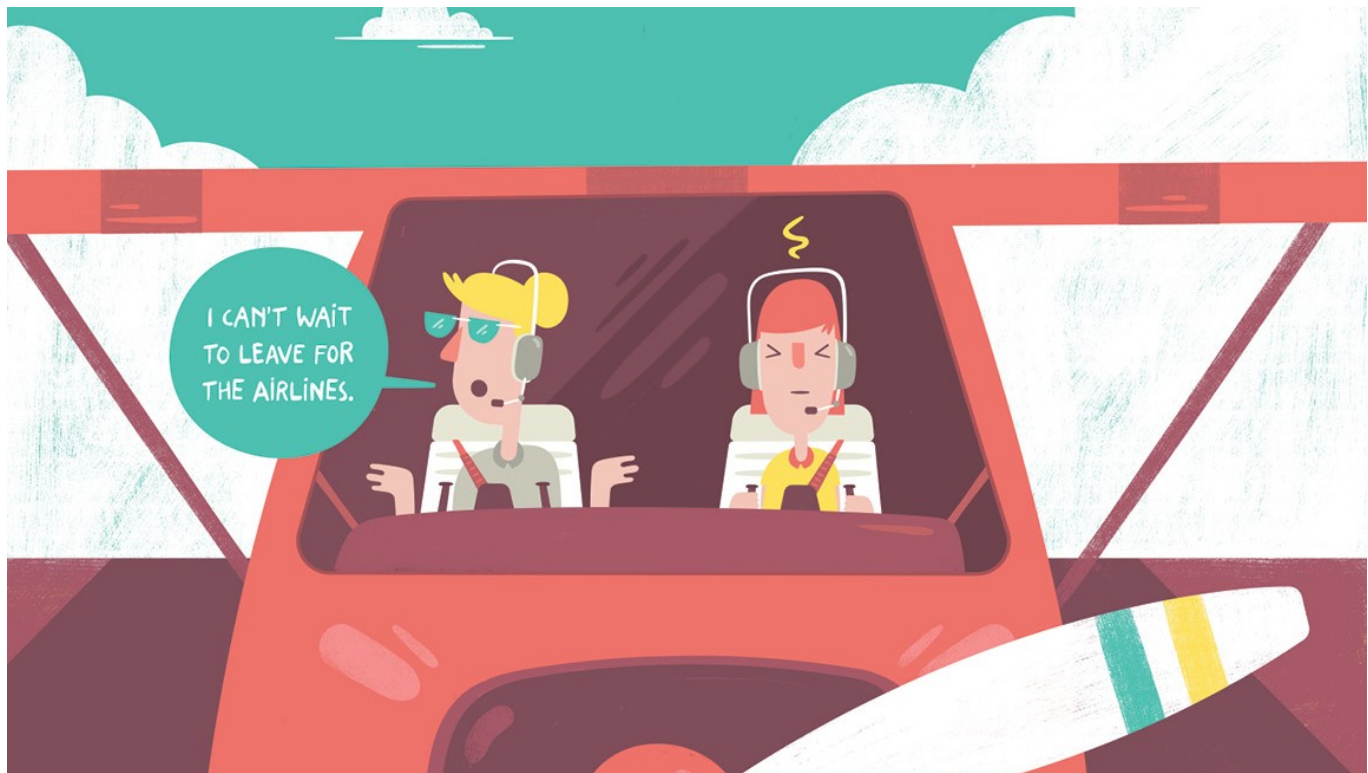


Illustration by Shaw Nielsen

1. "I cannot wait to get my hours and leave for the airlines. I hate teaching."

Flight training is expensive. While college students have access to low-interest student loans, and some other students take commercial loans, most of us pay as we go. We have to budget our money to pay for the needed hours of training. Hearing from your instructor that he or she dislikes doing this creates a negative impression. Keep that plan to yourselves, and dedicate yourself to what you're doing now.

2. Assuming students understand the jargon of flying.

No, we don't immediately know what "getting vectored in for an ILS approach in MVFR" means. Having an instructor roll his or her eyes or sigh with exasperation when you don't know what something means is both disrespectful and self-defeating. While many students will study the required material and do their own research, they are still on a journey of ever-increasing knowledge. Encourage students to read aviation magazines, delve deeper into their ground school, and be there to explain the meaning of words and phrases they don't understand. Spend time conversing with students in a language they understand.

3. Loud, often expletive-laden, unexpected exclamations during flight training.

This is my personal favorite, crazy-making behavior from an instructor. Bouncing around the sky in a Cessna 172 doesn't come naturally to most people. The airplane is tiny, the sky is huge, and it hardly seems reasonable that this little piece of metal will stay up there. Fear is a reality; nerves are stretched taut. Having an instructor shout, "Oh, my God!" doesn't induce confidence or serenity. Saying, "Are you trying to kill us both?" is a sure way to prompt a student to panic and make the situation worse. Learning to fly is supposed to be an enjoyable process. Instructors need to remain calm, keep the terror out of their voices, and refrain from reducing the student to a jelly-like mass in the left seat.

No, we don't all know what "getting vectored in for an ILS approach in MVFR" means. Explain the meaning of words and phrases students don't understand.

4. Not understanding we have lives outside of flying.

Mature students, specifically, have careers, families, and responsibilities that take precedence over flying.

Instructors, in seeking to build a relationship based on trust, should ask about the lives of students beyond the flight school—and listen. Listening to learn, rather than to respond, goes a long way in educating the instructor to the mindset and temperament of a student. It helps with understanding why the student does certain things in a particular way, and offers insights that could be enlightening during flight planning. Acting as though the student's life outside of flying is irrelevant to you, or shouldn't encroach on training, is one of the themes I repeatedly heard from students. However, it's also important that the instructor have boundaries and appropriate social filters when discussing nonflying-related topics.

5. Lack of preparation.

Nothing is quite as frustrating to a student as turning up on time and prepared, only to find the instructor is both tardy and unprepared for the training. Having an instructor saunter in 15 minutes late—coffee in hand, and distracted—asking you to remind them of what you

did on the last lesson is not only unprofessional, but is hardly encouraging. Forward planning includes being present as the student arrives; welcoming the student; sitting down before the flight; and going over a well-constructed, well-thought-out plan of action. It induces confidence in students, and gives them a clear direction. It is crucial to students' attitudes that the instructor is thinking about their training even when they are not there.

6. Poor communications and direction.

Communication in the cockpit and the classroom is vital to a successful flight training experience. Make sure students understand the message you are conveying. Check to be certain they grasp the meaning of what you are telling them. Never simply assume students get it. Ask questions about what you have just said. Push them to think beyond what you have said, and how it applies to flying. As my instructor pointed out, the cockpit is not a good teaching environment. There's a lot going on, fast, in a confined space, at altitude. Clarity of purpose is necessary, before the maneuver begins. Using ambiguous words or conflicting statements is confusing to students, and may cause anxiety or reactive behavior. Be consistent.

7. Lack of teaching ability.

Knowing how to fly does not mean you can automatically impart the principles of flying to a student. Most of us know professors who are geniuses in their field, but can barely string together a coherent sentence in the classroom. Spend time reading about the "how" of flight instruction—not the technical aspects, but the sharing of necessary knowledge. There are some excellent resources available for education. Make knowing how to teach a part of your résumé; it will prove invaluable for your students and you.

Among the drivers for human happiness are autonomy, mastery, and achievement. Make a big deal of the milestones.

8. Canceling training because it's interfering with your other job.

Flight instruction pays poorly, and many instructors have other jobs to supplement their income. But it's irritating and disruptive to students to repeatedly cancel flight lessons

because the instructor's other job is demanding more time. Most students have to arrange their classes or work days to enable them to make time for flight training. It creates a bad impression for the student when an instructor is unable to arrange his or her day for training. Once in a while is acceptable, but making it commonplace is sure to drive a student either to another instructor, or another flight school.

9. Not keeping notes about a student's flight training.

Asking a student what you did last time, and then devising a lesson on-the-spot is poor form. It's essential that instructors keep a file on each student they have, and write detailed notes after each lesson. These should be shared with the student on a regular basis; it plots a graph of progress and keeps student and instructor on the same page. It matters to students that their instructor is familiar with their weaknesses and strengths when it comes to learning how to fly. There is no cookie-cutter student. And, while a template of instruction is useful, seeing an instructor with a set of notes pertaining directly to your training shows focus and dedication to student flight education.

10. Not celebrating the achievements.

Among the drivers for human happiness are autonomy, mastery, and achievement. Students are driven by these, too. Make a big deal of the milestones. What instructor doesn't remember his or her own first solo flight? Returning after the first solo to be met by the school's stable of flight instructors sitting in the lounge glued to their cellphones, not even bothering to acknowledge your presence, is deflating and disappointing. Worse is if your own instructor barely notices and rushes off with another student. First lesson, first solo, first cross-country, the checkride—these are not just flying milestones, they are stellar life achievements. Students want to feel that, and as the African proverb says, "I am me because of you," the whole flight school should recognize and celebrate what the student has accomplished.

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