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PILOT PROFICIENCY

Ultimate Issue: First Few Hours of Being a CFI Are the Hardest

Here are 12 suggestions to help make your journey as flight instructor a smooth one for both you and your learners.



MEG GODLEWSKI Updated Sep 2, 2024 3:26 PM EDT



An instrument rating is part of the requirement to be a CFI, so make sure you keep it ready for use. [iStock]

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Congratulations! You earned your flight instructor rating, and now it's your turn to teach someone else how to fly. But just because you now carry the title of CFI doesn't mean you know all there is about teaching flying.

I am coming up on 21 years as a CFI, and there are stumbling blocks I've seen freshly minted CFIs trip over. Here are 12 suggestions to help make your journey as an educator a smooth one for both you and your learners:

1. Use a syllabus

Even if you were not trained with a syllabus, or the school you are working at is Part 61 and doesn't require it, please use one, be it [paper](#) or [electronic form](#). It will help you stay organized and deliver lessons in a logical order. Make sure your learners have a copy and bring it to lessons.

Pro tip: If your learners don't have a copy of the syllabus, you're not really using one with them. They need to have a copy for best results.



2. Introduce FAA certification standards on Day 1

The [Airmen Certification Standards](#) (ACS) is required reading for both the

CFI and learner. A learner can't perform to standard unless they know what those minimum standards are. The ACS spells them out quite clearly.

Don't wait until just before the check ride to bring them out and apply them. Use the ACS in the pre-brief so the learner knows the metrics for which they are aiming.

- **READ MORE:** [The Importance of Embracing Proficiency Culture](#)

3. Stress the use of a checklist

This starts with the preflight inspection. Have the checklist in hand. Teach to the premaneuver, cruise, and of course, prelanding checklists as well. Emergency checklists should be memorized.

Bonus points: Show the learner the pages in the pilot's operating handbook or [Airplane Flying Handbook](#) from which the preflight checklist was derived. Teach them to use that if the checklist disappears— as it often does at flight schools.

4. Teach weather briefing and aircraft performance

Teach the learner to obtain and interpret a weather briefing and to calculate aircraft performance from Day 1. Discuss weather minimums and how their personal minimums will change as their experience grows.



If the learner does not want to fly in certain weather—such as especially turbulent days or if the weather starts to go bad during a lesson—be ready to terminate. Flight instruction is about teaching good decision-making in addition to flying skills.

5. Manage your schedule for the learner's benefit

While it is true that most CFIs are building time to reach the airlines, do not overload your schedule at the expense of the learner. The learner should be able to fly at least twice a week, though three times is optimal for best results. Manage your student's load so you are flying six to eight hours a day—that's a hard stop at eight hours.

Be ready to go at least 10 minutes before the learner arrives. That means scheduling lessons so the aircraft is on the ground at least 15 minutes before the next lesson so that it can be serviced if needed and you can take care of the debrief and logbook of the previous client. Be sure the person who does the scheduling understands the limitations of scheduling, such as when you timeout at eight hours.



Pro tip: The quickest way to lose a client—and possibly your job—is to disrespect a learner's time. There will likely be a time when you miss a lesson or are late. Apologize and make it up to the learner by giving them

a free lesson, even if it means you have to pay your employer for the use of the airplane and your time. You won't like it, but it's about character and doing what's right, especially if the school has a "no-show, you-pay" policy for the learners.

- **READ MORE:** [Separation Anxiety: When Your Instructor Moves on, Your Logbook Tells the Story](#)

6. Don't spend too much time on the controls

This is a hard habit to break. Try holding a writing implement in your hand while you hold your other arm across your body. If you are going to fold your arms on your chest, tell the learner it's to show them you're not on the controls.

Some people interpret this posture as being angry, so make sure you say something up front.

8. Eliminate the 'pretty good' metric

"Pretty good" is not a pilot report on weather conditions or an assessment of the learner's performance. Teach them to be precise on weather observations, such as "light winds, ceiling at 3,000 feet," and for learner performance use metrics, such as "altitude within 200 feet," for performance review.

Ask the learner how they would like feedback on their performance—in the moment or at the end of the lesson in the debrief. Some learners



prefer the CFI to sit there quietly while they flail around with the controls. Others prefer real-time correction, such as "your heading is off by 10 degrees," which allows them to fix it.

9. Don't pass up the opportunity to teach a ground school

That is when you really find out if you really are a teacher of flight or a time builder. Teaching in the classroom and demonstrating something in the airplane involve vastly different skill sets.

Reading slides off a screen or material out of a book is not teaching. To be an effective teacher, the CFI needs to get the learners engaged in the material. The best teachers are memorable.

- **READ MORE:** [Make Flight Reviews for CFIs Worthwhile](#)

10. Allow the learners to make mistakes

Mistakes are part of learning. In aviation, they happen quite a bit, and as long as no metal is bent, no one is physically hurt, there is no property damage, or broken FARs, allow them to happen.

If things go badly and the learner is upset, the worst thing you can do is tell them to sit there while you fly back to the airport. This can destroy their confidence. Instead, try having the learner review and practice a maneuver already learned. Strive to always end the lesson on a positive note.



11. Plan for poor weather or mechanical delays

Always approach each day with two plans for each learner—flight or ground. Let the learner know in advance what the plans are: "If we fly, we will do this; if we cannot fly, we will do that."

There is the option to cancel if the flight cannot be completed, but you should be prepared to teach. For example, if the weather is below minimums or an aircraft is down for maintenance and the shop rules permit it, take the learner into the hangar and do a practical pointing using the aircraft engine or cockpit instruments.

12. Make time for your own proficiency and currency

Protect your flying skills. You can do this in part by demonstrating takeoffs and landings or by asking the learner if they are OK with you doing a few at the end of the flight with the understanding you will be paying for that aircraft time and will adjust the bill accordingly.



Don't neglect your instrument skills either. Use the advanced aviation training device (AATD) if the school has one and shoot a few approaches

and holds a couple times a month, or pair up with another CFI during off-peak hours to do some real-world IFR flying.

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This column first appeared in the Summer 2024 Ultimate Issue print edition.

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Ultimate Issue



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Meg Godlewski has been an aviation journalist for more than 24 years and a CFI for more than 20 years. If she is not flying or teaching aviation, she is writing about it. Meg is a founding member of the Pilot Proficiency Center at EAA AirVenture and excels at the application of simulation technology to