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Talking the talk

By Charles Wright

The key to radio use is waiting your turn and keeping it short

One of the most uncomfortable tasks for some pilots is learning how to talk on the radio. People work up an almost paranoid self-consciousness about how they will sound and be perceived while talking in the blind on an open frequency. Such discomforts are not set at ease when other pilots can be heard making snide comments about the transmissions of a rookie. But, learning to use the radio is not as hard as it is often made out to be.

Like any other aspect of aviation, talking on the radio has certain rules that are designed to maximize efficiency. All are spelled out in the *Aeronautical Information Manual* (AIM).

Listen

This is the most important rule of all. Before you transmit, exercise the etiquette of listening to make sure that no pilots or controllers are speaking. To take that a step further, you also need to make sure that a controller is not exchanging several transmissions with a particular pilot. If such a dialog is going on, wait until it is over before trying to make your own transmission. Two people trying to transmit at the same time leads to a horribly loud screech in your headsets.

Think

Quite often when you hear a pilot get on the frequency and sound like he doesn't belong there, it is because he didn't have a good idea of what he wanted to say before pushing the mic button. Until talking on the radio becomes second nature, you need to have a good idea of what information you want to convey before you try to get it out. Think of the baseball player who tries to throw the ball to nail a double play -- before he's finished catching it. He either misses the ball entirely or gets so flustered that he throws it into the stands.

Brevity counts

In your first transmission, you need to get three pieces of information across to the controller, or to other pilots if you are in a nontowered environment: who you are, who you are talking to, and where

you are (and if appropriate, your intentions). When contacting ATC, your first transmission should include the full N number, after which you usually can abbreviate the call sign.

Also on that first transmission, if you are approaching a towered airport for landing, you need to report that you have the appropriate ATIS information. That first transmission is not the time to start explaining what you want to do. If you are looking for a request to deviate from your course or change your altitude or take a tour of the local scenery, keep the first transmission to a minimum and add the word *request*: "Orlando Approach, Cessna Niner-Niner-Eight-Eight-Seven at 4,000 feet with request." When the controller has time to hear what you need to say, you can tell him, but again, keep it brief. Think of the first transmission as an introduction.

In the traffic pattern, you should state your call sign at the beginning of every transmission, and state where you are or where you are going. "Municipal traffic, Cessna Niner-Niner-Eight-Eight-Seven downwind to base Runway 29, Municipal." Stating the name of the airport at the end of the transmission allows pilots that might have missed the name of the airport the first time to catch it the second time. This is especially important if there are several airports using the same frequency in the area.

Listen again

Nothing will drive air traffic controllers (or other pilots) nuts faster than a pilot who checks in on a new frequency and then does not listen for his call sign. Once you are in contact with ATC, especially in busy airspace, it is *imperative* that you pay attention and respond quickly when you are called again. It's one thing to misunderstand something the controller says, and have to ask "Say again"; it is something else to repeatedly not hear it. If it is a busy day, and you have passengers on board, instruct them to be quiet, or turn off the intercom.

Acknowledge with a proper readback

In normal face-to-face conversation, you often can ascertain if someone understood the message of your communication based on their physical reaction. On the radio, you cannot do that. If a controller or another pilot speaks to you, then you need to acknowledge what was said by repeating the command in full so that there is no chance of confusion.

When talking to a controller, the general rule is that you must fully acknowledge all commands. Climbs, descents, turns, and clearances must be repeated so that the controller knows that you received the proper information. Acknowledging a descent clearance with just your call sign is not acceptable and can incur the wrath of the controllers, especially if they are busy and have to waste time getting you to do your job. Likewise, acknowledging a command without using your call sign is also a no-no, because the controller doesn't know which aircraft took the command.

On the ground, the most critical -- but by no means the only -- items to read back are hold-short commands, and it doesn't matter if the hold-short command is for a runway or a taxiway. If you don't properly read back the hold-short command, the controller is required to bug you until you do.

Ask

There is no excuse for not asking for clarification if you do not understand the instructions you have been given. Never mind if the controller sounds irritated or annoyed. In the end, he would prefer that you ask and avoid an incident or an accident simply by asking a question. I can assure you that you feel the same way.

Remember, not even the professionals always sound professional. If you hear a pilot receive a long series of commands and respond with "We'll do all that," shake your head. Likewise, pilots and controllers alike can be guilty of trying to talk too fast in order to save time. But even fast-talking auctioneers make mistakes, and when that happens, sometimes it's funny, and sometimes it isn't. Invariably, the mistake needs to be corrected, and that also takes time.

Proper communication on the radio is critical to making our busy national airspace system work. With practice, homework, and patience, you can master the art of air traffic communications in short order.

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