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The Plateau Problem

What do you do when you hit the wall?

By Jill Tallman

The fifth or sixth lesson in a row spent pounding out landings in the traffic pattern. Slow flight that suddenly falls apart like a rampaging toddler who's overdue for a nap. The fact that you could do a flawless steep turn after you learned the maneuver but, when asked to perform it on a stage check, you can't seem to hold the sight picture or remember when to add power. The sinking realization that you've spent a lot of money doing the same thing over and over—without any noticeable improvement.

Welcome to the learning plateau.

Learning to fly isn't a linear process, and nothing brings this home more dramatically than the plateau. After weeks of enjoyable advancement, students almost universally find that what progress they have made seems to evaporate—what used to come relatively easily has slipped back out of reach. A growing frustration results. A sympathetic flight instructor will be quick to assure you this isn't the end of the world, nor does it mean you're not meant to be a pilot. Does this sound familiar?

That's because virtually everybody experiences learning plateaus—pilots, sailors, dancers, golfers, anyone who is training for any type of activity that involves motor skills. Plateaus are a natural part of the learning process. The Aviation Instructor's Handbook cites some circumstances that could lead to a plateau: "The student may have reached capability limits, may be consolidating levels of skill, interest may have waned, or the student may need a more efficient method for increasing progress."

Plateaus are so predictable, in fact, that Flight Training contributing editor, aviation educator, and professional speaker Rod Machado can tell you when they're most likely to hit. You may experience two learning plateaus, in fact—one when learning to land, and another when prepping for your checkride. "Now, many smaller learning plateaus are possible but these two are the most common," Machado says on his website.

Plateaus are a popular topic of discussion on Flight Training Contributing Editor Greg Brown's website and Student Pilot Pep Talk blog). Sharing their frustrations, students are often gratified to discover that they're not alone. Typical comments include this one from Lesley: "Practicing forced landing technique, how come when I did this the first time a few months ago I nailed it quickly? This time I had an utter brain freeze.... I feel so much better that it is not just me, it is normal and next time I will do it." New pilot Mark described the frustration he experienced while trying to learn to land. Even though Mark's CFI had discussed plateaus with him, and even though he knew "intellectually" that he would get through, "that didn't make the frustration any more palatable," he said.

Men and women experience learning plateaus somewhat differently, according to CFI and flight school manager Arlynn McMahan. In her book, *Train Like You Fly*, McMahan references the Aviation Instructor's Handbook graph reproduced here (above), but notes, "Generally, female graphs have sharper angles with higher peaks and lower valleys, while male graphs are smoother, with smaller peaks and valleys."

Could the relatively high dropout rate in student flight training be connected to this phenomenon? It's entirely possible. Consider that only one in three students will get all the way to checkride day. Learning to fly isn't cheap, and if you find yourself burning holes in the pattern without making headway toward your goal, you may question your motives in learning to fly at all.

What to do when it hits you

So, like Mark, you've been warned. If and when you find yourself stuck on a learning plateau with no improvement in sight, remember: This is normal, and it happens to almost everyone. Consider these strategies to get through the dry spell:

Get some sleep. The brain can't function properly on too little sleep and too much caffeine. You may simply be tired.

Take a step back. You may be over-practicing. McMahon asserts that repeating any lesson more than three times could put you on the runway to a plateau. She advocates moving to another area of the flight curriculum before a plateau can occur.

Consider it from another angle. Could your flight instructor find another way to teach you the maneuver? Could you ask another CFI to teach it to you?

Take a break. If necessary, stop flying for a few days or a week and allow your mind to process what it's learned.

Take stock. Reflect on your goals in learning to fly. Then think how far you've come. *A year ago, I'd never been inside a small airplane. Now I'm almost ready to take my checkride. Or, When I started these lessons I couldn't taxi an airplane, let alone land one.* Above all, remember that those who persevere do succeed. Be proud of your accomplishments, and be strong in the knowledge that the best is yet to come.

Flight Training Associate Editor Jill W. Tallman is an instrument-rated private pilot.

Websites mentioned in the article:

- <http://www.rodmachado.com/>
- <http://gregbrownflyingcarpet.wordpress.com/>

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