The Best of *Flight Training* Magazine
Brought to you by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association

Talk less, say more

What to say to air traffic control, and how to say it

By Karen M. Kahn

Have you ever felt you've been "done wrong" by air traffic control? From long departure delays ("just what are we waiting for?") to interminable vectors, reroutes, slow-downs, or being ignored when you need a reply, it's bound to happen. If you'd like to lower your stress level, you'll find it pays to adopt some habits that can shield you from the worst of the flying flack.

First of all, let's dispel the common misconception that air traffic controllers provide preferential handling to the airlines. I think a better word might be *professional*. I'm sure that each of you, in your own environment, has encountered those who are at ease with their surroundings and can interact easily with others. In our world of sightless communications, ATC naturally reacts better to those who can communicate their needs clearly, concisely, and in a pleasant manner. As with any other arena, making a good first impression is extremely important, as well as maintaining it throughout your conversations. As you begin your "speaking" career, it will require some thought and some practice, but will ultimately pay big dividends as you acquire the skill to get what you want, *when* you want it.

Professionalism starts with understanding your needs and those of ATC, and realizing that controllers have limitations--just as you do. It also means being flexible and learning to how to say "no" when necessary, as well as "yes," to safely operate your aircraft.

Getting the best service from ATC

- Understand your own needs as well as those of ATC.
- Sound like a pro--a courteous professional.
- Plan ahead; say it better with fewer words.
- Listen to other skilled pilots and imitate their style.
- Don't step on the transmissions of other pilots or controllers.
- Speak clearly and a bit more slowly than normal.
- Question any wrong or strange-sounding instructions.
- Listen carefully to avoid missing transmissions.
- Speak up if you're asked to do the impossible; tell ATC what you can or cannot do safely.
- Admit your mistakes and learn from those of others.
- Offer to step aside when faster aircraft are nipping at your heels.
- Think ahead and prepare for your upcoming approach early.
- Be flexible; changes *will* occur.
- Speak up (maybe on the ground later) if you feel wronged.

It's important to sound like a professional--that's the key to good service. Plan ahead, as experienced pilots do, preparing your transmission off the air, *before* you key the microphone, for better on-line service. Imagine how you're going to sound and how you could say it better, with fewer words. If it's a long request, alert ATC that you have a longer-than-normal spiel by saying "Center, Cessna Five Kilo Charlie (or whatever your N number may be, abbreviated to the last three digits if you've already talked

to this controller), request." This helps to keep the frequency clear, and the controller will get back to you and ask you to "say your request" when time and workload permit.

Listen to skilled pilots and imitate their style. If it's very busy on the frequency, you'll notice they abbreviate their message or just wait for ATC to call them. Many times, particularly with approach control facilities, it's impossible to get a word in edgewise. Be patient.

Nothing turns off a busy controller faster than listening to the squeal of a bad transmitter or a garbled message with no discernible N number. Imagine spending all day on the radio having to deal with gibberish. Even worse, try making innumerable calls to airplanes that don't respond promptly. Your inclination, I'm sure, would be to get rid of the annoyance as soon as possible. If you are that annoyance, you can imagine the kind of service you are likely to receive.

Don't transmit when other pilots or controllers are transmitting. Wait until you hear the reply you'd expect if the controller was talking to you. You can usually tell by the content as to whether a reply will be forthcoming. Be courteous and wait for the exchange to be concluded before you jump in with your message. Then, speak clearly and a bit more slowly than you do in normal speech, and be sure to read back all assigned headings and altitudes. Remember that close to 60 percent of communications is done visually and when we lose that face-to-face edge, it's important to use a slower speed and specific tone of your voice to emphasize your needs.

Many student pilots or beginning instrument students tend to talk too fast on the radio. I know one airline captain who's found that when the frequency is jammed and no one's getting through to ATC, intentionally slowing his speech to the proverbial crawl can get him the attention and service he desires.

Be sure to question any instructions that sound wrong or strange. No doubt you've experienced the problem of thinking you said one thing and later realized it was quite another. As a single pilot, you'll need to listen carefully to avoid missing transmissions, and then, as a bit of aeronautical insurance, write down your assigned altitudes and headings to be sure you get them right. Or, if you're lucky enough to have one, set your altitude reminder. (I use my automatic direction finder indicator for an altitude reminder by rotating the card to show the number at the top index that represents my assigned altitude [e.g. 030 or "3" for 3,000 feet]. You can also buy an inexpensive rotating plastic pointer that affixes to the center of your altimeter, allowing you to move the pointer to the desired altitude. It's a great aid for remembering assigned altitudes, especially when you're solo.)

If you sound like you know what you're doing and you verbalize that to ATC, you'll get better service every time. It works because "sounding like you know what you're doing" is just about all ATC has to go on when they hear from you. Unless you're a commercial airline or corporate operator, ATC can't determine your level of skill or proficiency with the system, except by how you talk on the radio. If you sound timid or unsure of yourself, you'll get the communications equivalent of a raised eyebrow and find your acceptance level to be that much lower. You can eliminate the controller's doubts by giving him precise, well-planned phrasing that shows you've done your homework.

Sounding like a professional doesn't mean you can't speak up to ATC when you're asked to do the impossible. You're the only one who knows what you and your aircraft can safely accomplish, so don't be shy about declining an instruction with "unable," or requesting a change. Pros do it all the time. Whether

it's because you made a mistake or maybe the controller gave you a "no-way-can-I-do-that" clearance, it's your responsibility to let him know where you stand. If you mistakenly bit off more than you can fly, speak up as soon as possible; an early admission will put you on the road to forgiveness.

One of my Ten Commandments of Flying is, "Admit your mistakes and learn from those of others." Trying to hide it rarely works-and attempting to do so can net you a request to call the ATC facility after you land.

A few months ago, we had a gear door problem on a Boeing 757 while departing Houston for Los Angeles. The gear appeared to be up, but the door lights indicated that one of them was hanging slightly open, confirmed by a very subtle vibration throughout the airplane. Our *Quick Reference Handbook* said to keep the speed at 270 knots or less during climb, so we advised ATC that we'd be unable to comply with their request to "maintain 300 kt or greater until further advised." Eventually, as we climbed through Flight Level 240, the offending light went out, the rumble ceased, and we resumed a normal climb. I quickly advised the controller, who immediately took us off the "wounded" list.

When you are operating in a busy terminal environment speed becomes a factor. Those who have it generally get preference over those who don't. In a slower aircraft, you'll be playing "sandwich" with the quicker ones, and you'll need to listen carefully to see if you can picture the mix of traffic. Sometimes you'll be asked to fly faster (and maintain that speed longer) than you're used to. If you can't comply, expect a delay. You can, however, make big points by offering to let the pack go by--and put a smile on the controller's face.

During simulated or actual IFR flight, plan ahead. Know where each turn or altitude change is taking you relative to your phase of flight. If in doubt, ask ATC. They've been known to descend airplanes for landing at the wrong airport. A polite, "Five Kilo Charlie's destination is Santa Monica" can help them to keep you on track and altitude without having to undo their faux pax after you followed their vector to Torrance without question.

Think ahead about that upcoming approach while you're en route. You can prefly most of it in your head, beginning with a close look at the altitudes you'll need and where you'll need to start down to comply with printed altitude requirements.

My altitude planning usually sounds like this: *Let's see, I'll need to cross this intersection at this altitude, so I should start asking for lower at this point. I'll plan three minutes per thousand feet of altitude to lose-at approximately 300 feet per minute-so I can be easy on my ears and those of my passengers. If I have 6,000 feet to lose, that's 3 times 6 or 18 minutes for a gradual descent. If I want a steeper descent, I'll use 500 fpm or two minutes per thousand feet of altitude to lose.*

You now have the number of minutes out from the VOR or fix to start down. You can convert this to miles by knowing your groundspeed and thus the number of miles per minute you'll travel during your descent. Multiply the minutes found above by your miles per minute to determine your top of descent (TOD) point. Start asking ATC for a descent when you're three to five miles from that point--considering, of course, the minimum charted altitudes in your present area.

Another element of planning includes reviewing other alternatives or approaches in case your first choice is not available. I've often briefed two or even three approaches after finding that ATC has changed its plans, or the winds have changed, or maybe a disabled aircraft on the runway has snarled everyone's day. Be flexible and consider it another test of your skill.

Sometimes ATC bungles it. That's when it's time for you to speak up. I can remember making three approaches to Los Angeles International Airport in an airliner, each time receiving what I considered to be an impossible request from the controller. "Do you see the traffic ahead?" was the first query. "No, we're in the clouds," I replied, and that eliminated the possibility of a visual approach. With spacing too tight for IFR, we began a go-around. Next time they turned us in too close to another aircraft, requiring an impossible slow-up on our part. Another go-around later, we were back, shaking our heads in disbelief at what we figured had to be a case of controller-in-training.

Getting the best from ATC is a two-way street requiring honest input from both sides. When things go south, be prepared to admit your mistakes early on, learn from them, and press on. Be flexible and work with the system by planning ahead and keeping the controllers advised of your needs. Knowledge is truly power. The more you've got, the better prepared you'll be to navigate safely and efficiently in our air traffic control system.

Want to know more?

Additional information on topics discussed in this article may be found at **ft.aopa.org**.

Free Flight Training resources and educational tools for students!

Take advantage of AOPA's FREE, no risk six-month Student Trial Membership, including six FREE issues of Flight Training magazine. Zero obligation! Get your FREE student membership by going online to: **ft.aopa.org/free2**

Compliments of:

421 Aviation Way ● Frederick, MD 21701-4798 ● 800-USA-AOPA (872-2672) ● ft.aopa.org

The free student membership is available to students in their initial training who reside in the U.S. It cannot be combined with a paid AOPA membership.