



## The Best of *Flight Training Magazine*

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### Why do some students quit?

Five ways to help make sure that you're not one of them

By Dale Smith

You probably can't remember when it first happened--that first time when you knew you wanted to learn how to fly an airplane. Maybe it was something about the freedom of the sky, or prompted by pictures in a magazine, or motivated by a model airplane. Or maybe yours was born from a much more practical reason: You are just fed up with dealing with commercial airline travel, or tired of driving.

Why you want to learn isn't important. What is important is that about three and a half of every 10 student pilots reading this story will quit before they earn a pilot certificate.

Why is this important to you? Well, you could become one of them. "Not me," you say. "I've wanted this my whole life." That's great to hear. But it's a long way from here to there. And along the way many things could work to keep you from your goal.

To help you see and avoid these problems *AOPA Flight Training* talked to a number of experienced certificated flight instructors (CFIs) around the country to learn the top five reasons why students quit--and get some tips on how you can make sure it doesn't happen to you.

#### 1. Money

No surprise there. Flight training is expensive, especially if you're paying for it. But since we all know that, why would someone start flight training without having the money to finish?

"I think a big part of the problem is that a lot of flight schools and instructors set improper training expectations with prospective students," explained Mike Gaffney, president of flight training for Skyline Aeronautics in Chesterfield, Missouri. He means they quote a low price for the training that is figuratively achievable--if everything works perfectly.

But students learn at different paces. "Students come in two flavors: active and passive schedulers," added Dave McVinnie, chief CFI for Bode Aviation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "The 'active' ones are the career-track students. They are driven to learn as fast as they can so they can get a job. The 'passive' schedulers are learning for fun or maybe to fly for their business. They are not on anywhere as stringent a schedule. They take a lesson when they feel like it. That can really run the cost way up.

"I also think money becomes the easy cop-out for many students," he continued. "They decide they need to drop out for one reason or another--family changes, kids, job pressures, or they just aren't getting it, and it's easy to say, 'Well, you know, money is a bit tight right now.'"

So what can you do to avoid this problem? Fly as frequently as you can. Many instructors suggest that you try to fly at least twice a week. "Come to each lesson prepared and with a goal," Gaffney said. "If you can't measure your progress, you end up doing the same things over again. It costs more, and it gets frustrating for the student."

Some instructors recommend that students get the knowledge test out of the way before they begin their flying. "This puts [students] way ahead of the game," explained J.J. Greenway, chief flight instructor for the AOPA Air Safety Foundation. "They understand more when they are in the airplane. It's also a really cheap way to find out what you have to do to complete the private pilot program," he added. "Spending \$200 for a weekend ground school or DVD program is a lot better than spending a thousand or more and then realizing it is something you don't want to do."

## **2. Time**

That is, the lack of the student's willingness to commit the time it takes to learn how to fly. "People just don't understand how much time it will take," explained JoAnn Hill, master CFI and a vice president of education for the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI). "You have to spend a lot of time studying outside the airplane. and I don't think everyone understands that issue. People don't always have the self-discipline or the drive to do that."

"I also have students whose business is seasonal," added Nick Schillen, owner of NS Aviation, Inc., in Hollywood, Florida. "Their business gets slow, and they fly a lot. Then business picks up, and you don't see them for months. They forget everything they've learned and end up getting frustrated by their lack of progress."

So the ability to commit the time you'll need to do your lessons--in the airplane and on the ground--is key. "I say a student needs to establish a relationship with their instructor and proactively schedule their lessons in advance," Gaffney said. "Set the time aside they need to succeed. We find that someone who does this--plans to routinely fly two times a week and will commit the time to be prepared for each lesson--is twice as likely to succeed as someone who doesn't."

## **3. Lack of motivation, loss of interest**

It seems strange that a student pilot would lose his or her enthusiasm for flying, but it happens. "Something happens along the way. Maybe they've had to change instructors because their current instructor went on to an airline job or maybe they've had something happen where they've had to put off their flying for a month or so," explained Alexander "Sandy" Hill, master CFI and a vice president of education for NAFI (and JoAnn Hill's husband). "Or it could be a lack of progress. Something has taken away their drive and commitment to learn."

"Pre-solo is really tough," Schillen added. "If you are going to take 15 or 20 hours to solo, by the time they get to the fifteenth hour they're wondering if they really can do this. 'Am I really willing to keep on coming here and put forth the effort if I'm not getting anywhere?'"

Students aren't alone in their frustration. "I see a student and an instructor come back from a flight and it's sometimes blatantly apparent that nobody is having any fun," McVinnie said. "The instructor has a hangdog look and the poor student looks like he's been hit over the head with a stick. It's easy for the student to say heck with it." What can the student do to help get through this difficult time? "One thing

is to have the students engage themselves in flying," Gaffney said. "They need to do everything they can do to plug into the flying community. What I mean is everything from reading magazines to attending ground schools to just talking to other students." (See "Don't Let Delay Become Defeat," April 2006 *AOPA Flight Training*.) Discuss what you are feeling with your peers. You'll find that you're not alone.

Greenway added that another way to help a student stay motivated is for the instructor set realistic goals. "With scenario-based training you can show a student what they can do with an airplane once they get their certificate," he said. "Around here people want to go to Ocean City [Maryland]. In the summer, it's a horrible, traffic-choked three-and-a-half-hour drive, or it's an hour and 10 minutes in a Cessna 172.

"On a dual cross-country, we will take a trip down there," Greenway continued, "so they can see the practicality and ease of this type of transportation. It's a great way to keep a student motivated."

#### **4. Problems with the student/instructor relationship**

"People use the term *personality conflict* a lot, but the relationship that is established and nurtured between a student and the instructor is very delicate," Sandy Hill explained. "No one wants to admit that they are scared or confused in an airplane. But if a student has an issue or is scared or lacks confidence, they need to have the courage or relationship with their instructor to get to the bottom of the problem before they just quit."

"It is not a bad thing to ask to fly with another instructor," Gaffney said. "Too many times I see problems because a student is obligated to stay with the instructor they were given. Sometimes the communications or goals just don't line up. Make sure your instructor knows what your goals are. If they understand that you are just doing this for recreation or a personal goal they may change their training methods."

"Sometimes the student needs to step back" and assess the situation to see whether some aspect of the student/instructor relationship is interfering with his or her learning, McVinnie said. "Students have no frame of reference. They figure they have a good instructor, which they probably do. But is that instructor best for the way they learn?"

As if learning to fly weren't hard enough, this can set up internal and external stresses that hamper the whole process. Changing instructors for a lesson or two is like taking a vacation--the break can do you a world of good. "I've seen troubled students blossom with an instructor change," he added. "It may just be a change in philosophy."

Some students get progress checks with another instructor automatically, and think that's the same as a lesson with another CFI. McVinnie says it isn't. "Unfortunately these progress flights are even more stressful than a regular lesson, so it negates the advantage of flying with someone else."

#### **5. You name it**

There are a number of reasons bundled here: picking the wrong school; problems obtaining a medical certificate; wanting to learn to fly for the wrong reason; the list goes on and on. Any of them can be enough to stop your training dead in its tracks.

The good news is these potential pitfalls can all be avoided with one simple step: Take the time to interview a few good flight schools and instructors before you decide on one. Why? By taking this approach you are forced to ask yourself a number of key questions as to why you are doing this in the first place. What are your personal goals? What is your timing? Do you have all the money you need to get you through training? Are you healthy enough to be a pilot? (Better to find out now, than to wait until you're ready to solo.) Are the school's and instructor's goals the same as yours?

You can use AOPA Flight Training Online's searchable flight instructor database (<http://flighttraining.aopa.org/learntofly/instructor/>) and other Internet resources.

"I believe success starts with the right instructor," JoAnn Hill said. "Look up three or four instructors in your city. Give them a call and talk to them. What you are trying to do is to find someone whose teaching style matches your learning style--someone you'll feel comfortable with." You'll get a better match and have a better chance of fulfilling your dream.

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### Want to know more?

Additional information on topics discussed in this article may be found at [ft.aopa.org](http://ft.aopa.org).

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