

# MENTOR

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- Plan to Succeed
- The Point of No Return
- Beyond the Classroom

CHRIS MILLER



# Plan to Succeed

Fifteen things you can do to make  
students' checkrides go smoothly

BY JASON E. BLAIR, MCFI

The day of your student's checkride can be one of the most stressful days in his or her life. The greatest fear of any pilot is failure, or receiving a "notice of disapproval." In most cases, applicants are well-prepared and knowledgeable in the areas in which they will be tested, so failures are not the result of a lack of knowledge or ability, but rather of poor planning or external factors interfering with the applicant's ability to truly perform to the standards.

As a flight instructor, I have prepared and signed off many students for practical tests. As an examiner, I have administered a variety of applicants' practical tests. I have even taken a number of checkrides myself, and I know what they feel like. Through these experiences, I have observed and identified some common things that can adversely affect an applicant's performance.

**1. Make sure your students are ready.** Just because your student meets the minimum Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) time requirements doesn't necessarily mean he is ready to take a checkride. Trust your judgment on this one. You'll know readiness when you see it. If you—or your student—have any doubt, suggest he fly with another instructor for a second opinion. This is a good way to determine if he really is ready, and it gives your student the chance to test his knowledge and ability without the risk or cost of failing the checkride. That helps him build confidence and get comfortable with the idea of taking the practical test. Be aware if he is attempting to meet some time constraints—for example, if he's trying to "finish up" before he goes on vacation. That's not a good reason to rush. If your student isn't ready, help him see that holding off until he is, is worth the wait.

**2. Help them relax and take their time.** Do your best to help your student focus on doing the job at hand, not on the possibility

of failure. She should think her way through maneuvers and answers to questions and ignore the fact that she is being tested. Instead, treat the checkride as the last progress check before she will be allowed to go out on her own. I let her know that I am not there to try to fail her, only to make sure she meets the standards set forth by the FAA for the rating or certificate that she is pursuing. My job as an examiner is to make sure she is competent to exercise those privileges and to do so safely, not to

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try to trick her into failing.

There is no rush during the checkride. When she's setting up maneuvers in the air, coach your student to take the time she needs to set them up like she has been taught. If I ask her to perform a set of steep turns, that doesn't mean she has to immediately bank into the turn. Instead, I want to see her clear the area properly, choose her altitude and aircraft configuration, and then perform the maneuver with an appropriate recovery when completed. Rushing into maneuvers regularly results in

applicants missing something on the setup of the maneuver that can result in a checkride "bust." I remind her that I am testing her ability to be pilot in command (PIC). That means she decides how much time she needs to set up and safely complete a maneuver.

**3. Help them schedule appropriately.** Make a plan for your student's greatest potential for success and schedule accordingly. That means giving him time to comfortably get to the airport and have himself and his aircraft ready by the time I'm scheduled to arrive. If he doesn't typically rise early, it probably isn't a good idea to schedule the test for 7 a.m., and force him to arrive at the airport at 6 a.m. to prepare. If he is going to have to fly to a location, take travel time into account.

I try to get most of my students to show up at the airport approximately an hour before the examiner is scheduled to be there. As an examiner, I make an attempt not to arrive too early before a scheduled checkride to avoid putting undue pressure on an applicant to begin before he is prepared to do so. If his examiner is early, let him know not to sweat it. He is the PIC, and he's paid for the time. Stick to the schedule you've developed.

**4. Don't let them put undue pressure on themselves.** Having her entire family, friends, significant other, or other potential distractions there while your student takes her checkride is a bad idea. Will the examiner let her do it? Probably, but it's just going to add to the stress of the day. Likewise, discourage her from doing the checkride on her birthday, anniversary, or other important day in her life. If for some reason the checkride goes poorly, that can create a frustrating situation in front of the crowd or ruin an otherwise memorable day in her life. Remember, you're trying to help her plan for the greatest potential for success.

**5. Advise them to get a good night's sleep.** Discourage your student from staying up late the night before trying to “cram” more information into his brain. All that will do is make him tired for the next day. In many cases, this can actually lead to information interference and confuse the student more than it helps. While he may be nervous and anxious about the test, encourage him to do his best to get to sleep at a reasonable hour. This will help him stay alert throughout the test.

**6. The examiner is only human—really.** Examiners are people, too. I'm not a mean old FAA-designated grump who relishes every failure I get to hand out. Actually, the vast majority of examiners are there with the sincere hope that the candidate *will* pass. Most examiners started flying and went through the same steps that every student pilot goes through. We've made mistakes—and learned from them—in our own flying careers. We're not examiners because we are super-pilots unmatched in ability by anyone else. We are examiners because we have the flight experience and knowledge to determine if new pilots have the skill to meet the minimum standards. If your student has problems believing this, go meet the examiner before the checkride. A shared cup of coffee at the airport on a Saturday morning can go a long way. That will definitely help your student to be more comfortable.

**7. There is no “failure quota.”** I'm not required to fail anyone. I just want to see consistent performance throughout the checkride that is indicative of a safe and knowledgeable pilot. As long as the student performs at or exceeds the minimum practical test standards, he will pass the test, even if I have passed my last 100 applicants.

**8. Have them use me as a passenger.** I once had an examiner come and talk with me after one of my private pilot students completed his checkride. He wanted to tell me something that the student had done on the checkride that he had not seen be-

fore. When the applicant was returning to the airport, the student asked him to hold the chart. The examiner responded with a simple question: “What would you do if I wasn't here to hold the chart for you?” Many students would have taken this to mean that the examiner was telling them that he wasn't supposed to help during the checkride and that it reflected poorly on their performance. Instead,

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the applicant replied, “If you weren't here, I would have an open seat next to me to place the chart on.” This was a fair and acceptable answer. It showed that the applicant was able to manage the cockpit and the resources that he had at his disposal.

I am going to ask questions about your student's actions in order to find out how he operates as a pilot. The student shouldn't immediately assume it means he's doing something wrong. In most instances, a clear, honest, and practical answer is all I'm looking for. On the flight portion of the checkride, treat me as a knowledgeable passenger. The student should not expect me to take on any of the duties of a pilot of the aircraft, but it is reasonable to ask me to hold something if he'd like. I can become a resource just like any passenger.

**9. The student shouldn't guess.** If I ask the student a question and she doesn't know the answer, she should be honest and tell me she doesn't know. If she has reference materials with her to look it up—and she knows where to find it—she should tell me. Depending on the type of question, I may allow her to use those resources. After all, as an examiner there are certain questions I don't expect an applicant to answer from rote memory. I do, however, need to know that she knows where to find the information. Guessing at an answer—or as my first flight instructor called it, “shooting from the hip”—will most likely result in her providing an answer that she isn't confident about. Most examiners pick up on this fairly quickly, and we'll start digging deeper into the subject to see if the student really understands what she is talking about. The final result is a confused checkride applicant who is trying to tell the examiner something that is based less on knowledge and more on an attempt at logic and reasoning. She may get lucky, but more often than not she will uncover an area of weak knowledge that may result in a failure.

**10. Your student will make a mistake.** Your student should expect that at some point during the checkride he will do something that could be grounds for a failure. This does not necessarily mean that he will fail. If I give him a notice of disapproval, I am required to tell him the point in time when he performed to a lesser standard than the applicable practical test standards (PTS). It goes a long way with me if the student talks his way through a maneuver. If he makes a mistake, he should correct it and tell me what the mistake was and what he did to correct it. This lets me know that he is in full control of what the aircraft is doing.

If I am conducting a practical test and I ask the student to perform a steep turn and he is 50 feet low during the maneuver but says nothing about it, I have to wonder if he noticed,

didn't care, or simply wasn't able to keep his altitude constant. If the same student is 50 feet low and indicates that he recognizes the problem—and then describes a correct procedure to reclaim and hold altitude through the rest of the maneuver—I can be confident in his ability to perform the maneuver correctly.

**11. Applicants should strive for their best performance.** The PTS are minimum standards. They are the equivalent of a D grade. I suspect that most students would rather get an A than barely pass. Your student should know the standards and do her best to exceed them. Would you want a doctor to perform surgery on you who got it right 70 percent of the time? Probably not. You would rather have a doctor who got it right 100 percent of the time. Your student's future passengers don't really want a pilot who gets it right only 70 percent of the time either.

Along those lines, I've had contact with a wide variety of students, instructors, and applicants who simply did not know the standards to which they should be training. She should know the maneuvers that are expected of her.

**12. Don't let the weather choose your student's outcome.** Far too many applicants fail checkrides because they force themselves into weather that doesn't allow them to perform to the PTS, even if they are otherwise capable. Some even try to fly in weather that they wouldn't choose to fly in under normal circumstances. Applicants allow themselves to feel like they have to get the checkride done because it is scheduled, the plane is available, and the examiner is there. In most cases the weather that gets applicants in trouble is just a bit more wind or crosswind than they are used to, or ceilings that might allow the checkride to be completed but leave very small tolerances for cloud clearances. Part of the test is to see if your student can make appropriate

decisions regarding the planning and execution of the flight. Again, I am testing your student as the PIC. If she arrives under questionable circumstances, she isn't starting out with her best foot forward. Unless the conditions are unsafe to fly in and I'm not comfortable getting into the aircraft, I will let her make the choice to go flying. I must give her the benefit of the doubt that she is able to perform to the PTS in the given weather conditions. However, if the applicant does something that is not in accordance with the PTS, I must fail her. If the weather isn't what she would fly in for a pleasure flight, discourage her from taking the checkride. If she does, she places herself in an unlikely position to succeed.

**13. "Oops," "uh-ohs," and other auditory cues.** This one should seem simple, but simple key words such as these can really lead to anxiety in the examiner, especially in the air. If I am flying along with an applicant and he says "oops," I begin to wonder what went wrong. If it is a small mistake, it's possible that I didn't notice it. That auditory cue leads me to try to figure out what is going wrong.

Similarly, your student should be aware of what he inadvertently tells me during the checkride. If I ask him to perform a short-field landing and the first thing he does is sigh and tell me that it's his worst maneuver but he will give it a try, I am surely going to pay a great deal of attention to how well he performs. He shouldn't try to hide things from the examiner, but he should keep in mind the things he says can lead me to conclusions about his performance before he even gets a chance to show them.

**14. Know the airplane.** The checkride requires the student to determine that the aircraft is airworthy enough to conduct the test. To do so, she must know some basics about the aircraft. I will need to see that she can identify the appropriate inspections, documents, and require-

ments for flight. Most applicants can do this, but it's still helpful to have a good familiarity with the aircraft and the cockpit. I have seen a number of applicants fumble for long periods of time trying to get intercoms, lights, radios, and any other variety of switches and gadgets to work. If she has questions about what something does, or how to do something in the aircraft, she shouldn't ask the examiner. You should take the time to teach her these things ahead of time. It will go a long way toward building her confidence in her abilities.

**15. "I didn't pass!"** If your student fails, help him learn from it. It's not the end of the world. It doesn't mean he's a bad pilot—there is no punishment or negative mark on his record—and, in many cases, he'll learn more from failing a practical test than from breezing through it thinking he's a super-pilot. Take the time to go over the areas that the examiner thought were a bit weak and then have him come back and finish up.

As an instructor, I make sure my students are knowledgeable and confident before I sign my name to a recommendation. As an examiner, I like to see smooth, knowledgeable, and safe performance throughout the checkride. This is what your student should strive for—performing at a level that will make me believe he has been well-trained and is a safe and knowledgeable pilot who is deserving of the privileges for which he's being tested.

Help your students plan for success. Proper preparation for the checkride can turn one of the most stressful days into one of the greatest days of your student's life.

*NAFI Master Instructor Jason E. Blair owns Dodgen Aircraft (www.DodgenAircraft.com) and manages Allegan Municipal Airport and Hastings Airport in Michigan. He is a Wings of Mercy volunteer pilot and serves as a designated pilot examiner for the Grand Rapids Flight Standards District Office.* ■