

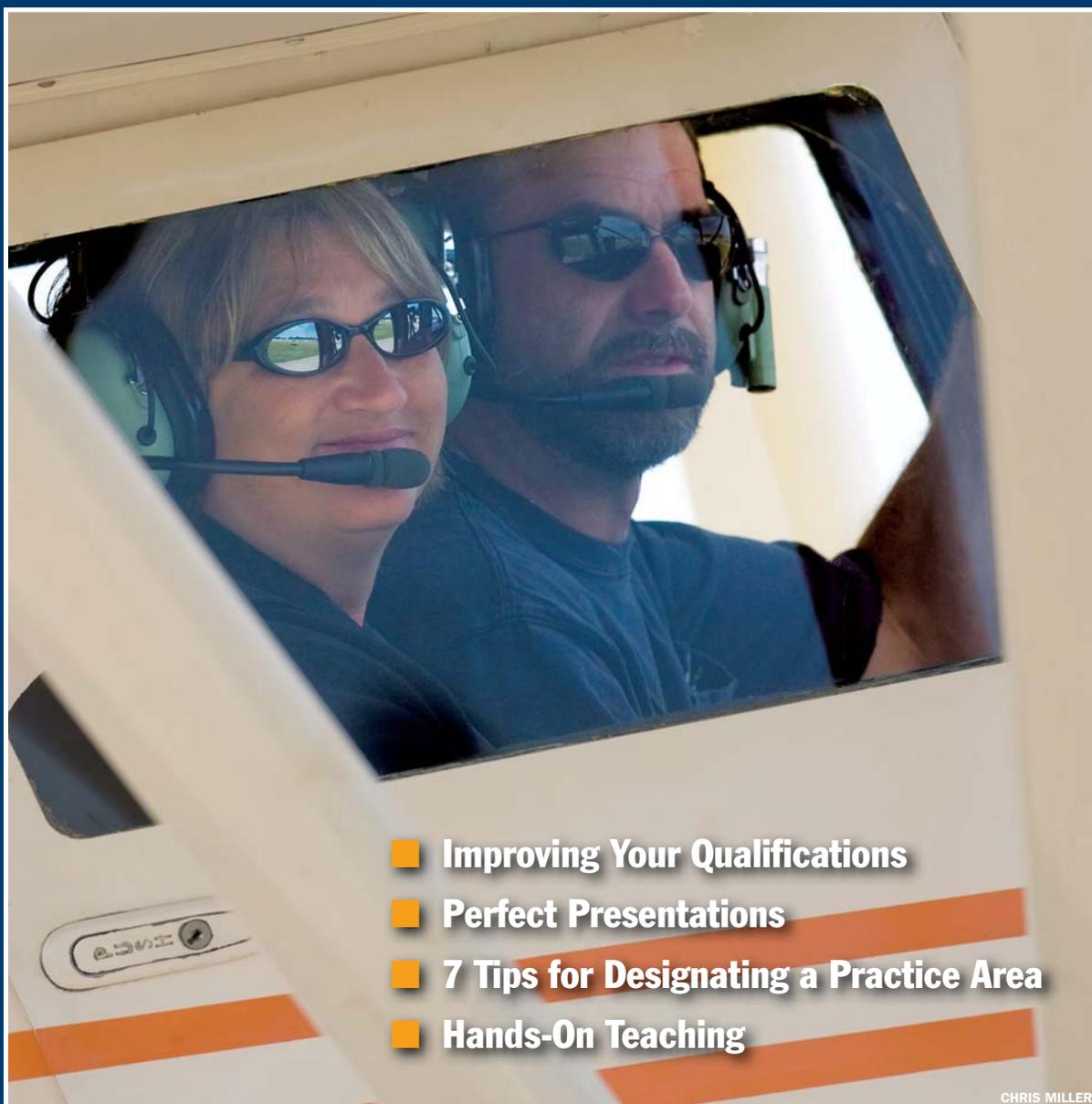
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- Improving Your Qualifications
- Perfect Presentations
- 7 Tips for Designating a Practice Area
- Hands-On Teaching

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In the Zone

Seven tips for designating a practice area

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In many training flights, the instructor and her student go to a “practice area” to conduct maneuvers practice. Many times, active flight schools have designated areas that they use, but if your school doesn’t have one, it may be time for you to develop one. Not only will it give you a suitable destination for air work, but having a designated practice area helps local pilots know where higher levels of aircraft operations and maneuvering-aircraft operations will be taking place.

While developing a practice area for your flight-training operation, keep in mind a few things you can do to make it more useful:

1. Give good ground-reference points.

Start by looking for an area that will have good ground-reference points. Creating an area that has good boundaries, good navigation references, and easily identifiable

landmarks will help students readily identify when they’ve reached the area. Use things like lakes, large buildings, railroads, rivers, and other large landmarks when you’re developing it.

2. Avoid populated areas.

When we conduct maneuvers practice, there are altitude minimums that we must adhere to. These altitude minimums are higher in populated areas, and they’re often high enough that they may not allow us to meet practical test standards for some of the maneuvers we must practice. If it’s possible to form the practice area away from populated areas, you’ll find that makes your practice less affected by required minimum altitudes.

Likewise, you should also consider the impact your flying will have on those who live below you. Depending on the number of training aircraft your school operates, you may want to make

an extra large practice area, or even designate several areas to lighten your footprint. Having 15 aircraft practicing over one spot every day could become a nuisance to the local residents in that area, and that will cause problems for you eventually. While we certainly have a right to that airspace, it’s prudent to consider the public relations side of the equation. Spreading your training operations out a bit will help avoid terrorizing local residents.

3. Avoid traffic congestion.

Some areas have less air traffic than others. Simple enough. Designating a practice area over the local VOR that serves as the transition for approaches to three or four local airports is probably not the best idea. Instead, look for areas that create some separation from heavily used airways, GPS navigation points, VORs, and visual flight rules corridors.

Airspace should also be a

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consideration. Obviously, you should avoid special-use airspace, such as military operations areas, restricted areas, and certainly areas within Class B, C, or D airspace. Each of these areas will likely have higher traffic volumes that aren't appropriate for student maneuvers.

4. Not too close, but not too far.

Your practice area should be far enough away from the airport that it isn't affecting incoming or outgoing traffic, but it shouldn't be so far that the majority of the training flight is spent transiting to or from the area instead of actually practicing. It's also the first opportunity most students will have to find their way back home to the airport.

When choosing a distance, try to find an area that accommodates these considerations. It should offer a good opportunity to introduce a student to pilotage and dead reckoning as he finds his way back to the airport, but it should also save his first cross-country experience for later.

5. Coordinate with other flight-training providers.

If you aren't the only provider of flight training in your area, you'll find it beneficial to contact other schools and coordinate your efforts at developing the practice area. This will help eliminate overlap of practice areas, and it can even help coordinate traffic expectations if more than one training provider is going to use the same area for practice at the same time. Contact other providers of training not just at your airport, but also at other airports within a 10-, 20-, or even 30-mile radius to talk about your efforts.

6. Coordinate an air-to-air frequency.

If a large number of aircraft are going to be using a designated practice area, establishing an air-to-air frequency may be helpful. It can be used to talk to other aircraft when you're both operating in the area, and that will help with traffic separation. Many flight schools have done this, and they've even developed "gate" systems for the entry and exit of the areas. It may help you to contact them for more information if

you've got a particularly busy practice area, so you can find out how they've made it work for them.

7. Publicize it.

It doesn't do any good to have a designated practice area if no one knows where it is. Make sure local pilots and schools know it's there. One quick and easy way to do this is to highlight the areas on an old sectional chart and post it at the local airport. You can take this to the next level by notifying local air traffic control agencies and local pilot groups if they're available. By doing so, you'll help develop awareness of the area that your flight school will be using for training.

Practice is an integral part of the flight training we provide. Making sure we have a good, well-thought-out, and safe area for practice will help develop awareness for local pilots and expectations within our training community. Good practice areas also help create comfort for the students, and then they can take their minds off figuring out where to go to practice their skills and focus on the lesson at hand. ■