



Choose the Right Instructor

Your enjoyment (and success) of flight depend on it. • BY STEVE MCCABE

FLYING IS FUN, make no mistake about it. Climbing up into the sky, cruising along miles above the world, and (my personal favorite) lining up a perfect approach before slicking in a landing so smooth you wonder if you've really touched down yet—all of these things are part of what make up the joys of flying. In my 30-some years, I've yet to find many things that can even come close. (Of course, given what I've paid for the privilege, it really should be fun, but that's a whole separate story.)

So why would anyone try to make flying miserable? I have no idea, but that's precisely what some instructors do. An instructor can show you what a thrill, a joy, flying can—and should—be. He can also make flower arranging seem an altogether more attractive option.

I've flown with a number of instructors, but there are two who have stuck in my memory. I'll call them Mike and Kenny. Mike was my first instructor. What this meant, and what he didn't bother to realize, was that as a result my future as a pilot rested largely in his hands. That's quite a responsibility, if you think about it. If you think about it. That was the problem, you see—he didn't take the trouble to think about it. He simply assumed that since he was the instructor and I was merely the student, I would accept whatever he told me.

I realized that this might not be an ideal situation from the start of our very first lesson. Mike and I knew nothing about each other, except that we'd been assigned to each other by the



Does your instructor listen to your questions and validate them with answers? Does he explain concepts and procedures in a way that you understand? If so, you've got a match!

chief pilot's office. I was placing a lot of trust in a man I'd never met before; and, it turned out, he was willing to put a little too much trust in me.

My "preflight briefing," such as it was, consisted of Mike telling me, "OK, go preflight the plane—I'll be right with you." So while a virgin pilot went out to conduct his first ever preflight check, Mike loitered around the ramp, chatting up a couple of good-looking young lady pilots. (I didn't have the heart to point out to him that, given that they were half his age and twice his height, he was likely wasting his time...)

Let's think about this for a moment. Mike had no idea of my flying knowledge—after all, he'd not even taken the trouble to get to know anything about

me—but he was willing to allow me to take responsibility for the safety of a plane which, as I discovered over the months I flew it, was part of a singularly poorly maintained fleet. He made no attempt to make sure that the plane was airworthy, preferring to trust the judgment of a zero-hour student looking at a Cessna 172 for the second time in his life. I found nothing out of the ordinary; but then, at this point "ordinary" was pretty much defined by whatever I saw in front of me at that moment. If the plane had had one wing missing and no propeller, I would have been inclined to consider that to be ordinary.

So up we went. Mike lectured me about my "sloppy" taxiing whenever ground wasn't chewing him out for

You owe it to yourself to make sure that the instructor you choose, or who is assigned to you, is acceptable to you. More, he should be suitable for you.



Your instructor is a very important person in your quest for your license. Just as there are all kinds of students, there are all kinds of instructors. Find the right one for you.

totally misunderstanding departure procedures in place to avoid the local restricted airspace. And then the pre-flight briefing proper began. Runway 25, we reached V_R , I rotated, and then—no sooner, no later—he thought to ask, “So, Steve, you ever flown before?”

He had me fly steep turns on that flight (just for the record, I flew them better than I ever have since, including, to date, on three successful attempts on checkrides). He had me perform maneuvers that properly belong on commercial syllabi. He yelled at me and belittled me. And, when I suggested that we make our first landing a full stop instead of a touch-and-go so that I could find a bag to become acquainted with, he made sure to let me know that I had no future in aviation.

So I complained, not entirely unreasonably, to the chief, who, on hearing Mike’s name, did something I don’t think I’ve ever heard him do any other time. He laughed. I was reassigned to Kenny, and Mike, having clearly annoyed one paying customer too many, was fired shortly afterwards.

I started again with Kenny and never looked back. A recent immigrant, Kenny

spoke with a strong but unidentifiable East-European accent. He made dreadful jokes and hogged the radio. But we got on well together, and he taught me to fly. He taught me, and this is something that Mike clearly never had any interest in doing. He made flying fun—just as I’d hoped it would be and just as Mike had made me fear it would never be. He worked me hard, but never made me feel like an idiot. (He didn’t have to—I did just fine on that score by myself.) “Kenny, when can we leave this hold?” I would ask him during instrument training; “When you get it right” would be the invariable reply.

Oh, don’t get me wrong—Kenny was far from perfect. The page in his English-Baltic dictionary that had “punctual” on it had clearly been ripped out many years earlier. I was afraid to see his cell-phone bill. And the accent—one can only pity the controllers who had to decode his transmissions. But while Mike was an “instructor” by virtue solely of the fact that he had an instructor’s ticket, Kenny was a teacher. And thanks to

Kenny, I got my private pilot’s certificate and made sure to request Kenny as my instructor for the instrument rating that he worked me just as hard through.

So what’s the moral of this story? It’s simple. There’s a lot of money in aviation, the old saying goes—I know, I put it there. My flying lessons have cost me sums that would give my accountant father palpitations, and I want to get very good value for that hard-earned money. So should you. Remember, you’re paying a lot for a dream you’ve held a long time. You owe it to yourself to make sure that the instructor you choose, or who is assigned to you, is acceptable to you. More, he should be suitable for you. I’m sure that Mike might have been suitable for some students (although I can’t for the life of me imagine who); he most certainly was not, however, the right instructor for me.

In the wrong hands, flying can be hard work—hard, miserable, tense and frightening labor. In the right hands, however, flying can be the joy that we know it to be.



Make sure you feel good about and comfortable enough with their teaching style that you come away from each lesson having made a little more progress from the last time. And if you don’t, it’s OK to say so and find a different instructor. Talk to your instructor about your concerns; if you meet any resistance to the change, try the Chief Pilot.