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The Practical Test

Some tips for passing

More pilots were trained during World War II than any time before or after those trying years. The training was rigorous, and a system of “washout” checkrides quickly eliminated applicants who might need extra training to make the grade. Training resources were stretched to the limit, and the washout philosophy kept the line moving.

This system of high-pressure training and stringent checkrides was relegated to history many years ago, but its shadow remains. Some pilots still look at the checkride, now called the practical test, with fear and trepidation. In reality, it is nothing more than a logical and carefully planned step on the path to becoming a certificated pilot.

Who Administers the Test?

FAA inspectors can perform checkrides, but they seldom do because FAA's resources are quite limited. Instead, the FAA created the designated pilot examiner (DPE) program to allow private individuals to act as agents for the FAA. DPEs are authorized to administer practical tests after a complex selection and training process that assures they are capable and qualified to do the evaluations.

The FAA recognized that the influx of new sport pilots and ultralight pilots transitioning to sport pilots could overload the current system. Consequently, it is training and appointing sport pilot examiners (SPEs) specifically to test sport pilot applicants. Hundreds of existing DPEs perform practical tests



"You did a great job preparing your airplane and your paperwork. Thanks for making my job easier."

for other pilot applicants every day, and some of these DPEs will also be trained to administer sport pilot checkrides. See sidebar, “To Find a Sport Pilot Examiner.”

The Practical Test Standards

To assure standardization in training and testing, the FAA publishes practical test standards (PTS) for every pilot certificate. The PTS clearly describe what tasks a pilot must have proficiency in, what the examiner will test, and what performance standard is required. For example, if you're testing for a sport pilot certificate, when demonstrating proficiency at turns around a point, the PTS establish that you must maintain

your altitude within plus/minus 100 feet and your airspeed within plus/minus 10 knots. That's the required performance standard.

It is the PTS combined with well-trained examiners that make the practical test a demonstration of your knowledge and abilities rather than a high-pressure, teeth-grinding event.

You and your flight instructor should use the PTS as a reference throughout your flight training. When I'm flight instructing, I use the PTS like a checklist, marking off what skills the student has achieved. At the beginning and end of each lesson we look at the PTS to see what skills the student still needs to become proficient at. By the time he or

she is ready for the practical test, each applicable task in the PTS should have a checkmark.

However, the practical test is more than just a demonstration of your flying skills. Oral questioning is a major part of the test. You can plan on an hour or two of questioning (and paperwork) on the ground before you begin the flight test, and some questioning will continue during the flight. This combination of oral questioning and your demonstration of your flying skills will show the examiner that you “exhibit the knowledge” that the PTS requires.

You should work with your instructor throughout your flight training to assure that you are meeting the requirements of the PTS. Waiting until the last minute to refer to it is a bad idea.

Test-Taking Tips

I don't have a degree in psychology, but I do have thousands of hours as a flight instructor, and I have administered about 1,000 practical tests as a DPE, so I have some insight into the testing process and its effect on individuals.

Human nature gets involved when you take your practical test. Both you and the examiner are human and have similar desires to feel accomplished. Passing the practical test is an accomplishment, and the examiner wants you to achieve that goal. Rarely does an examiner feel good about issuing a failure notice. When I was an active DPE, about the only solace I could take out of failing an applicant was that perhaps I directed the applicant toward needed additional training. An examiner wants you to pass. Most individuals become DPEs because they enjoy aviation and want to contribute to its betterment. They enjoy the opportunity to help someone achieve his or her goal of becoming a pilot. DPEs are not ogres looking to cause problems, and there is no FAA requirement that they fail a certain percentage of applicants.

Here are some specific test-taking tips:

1. Be prepared! That's a huge psycho-

logical plus for both the applicant and the examiner. Last-minute surprises aren't fun. As an examiner, when someone came in fully prepared, I eagerly anticipated a good testing experience. Show up unprepared, and your test is off to a bad start.

2. Your appearance is not covered in the PTS, but first impressions are always important. Look and act professionally.

3. Make sure your aircraft is 100 percent ready to fly. It should be clean, inside and out, fully fueled, and all equipment should be in good working order. I've had applicants show up with planes covered with oil leaks and/or bald tires. They didn't even pass the preflight!

4. Have all your aircraft's airworthiness documents organized. Take these into the examiner's office and be prepared to explain them. Know your maintenance and inspection requirements, even on a rented plane.

5. Set up a personal document folder. It should include the FAA 8710 application form (completely filled out and signed), your student pilot certificate (if applicable), and your logbook. The examiner will want to see all log endorsements; make sure you know where they are. The examiner also will want to view some of your logged training hours (for example, the three hours of test preparation). I have my students number the logbook pages and highlight the areas the examiner must see. Then they make a list of these locations to help guide the examiner and include this list in the folder.


6. The PTS tell you what publications you must bring. Have them with you, make sure they are current, and know how to use them.

7. Lastly, the examiner charges a fee for the test. A check or cash in the correct amount should be prominent in the documentation folder. Examiners like to know they're going to be paid.

The Flight

During the practical test, including any oral questioning, remember that you are the pilot in command. The person in the other seat is not there to help you. However, it is important

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To Find a Sport Pilot Examiner...

The FAA's Light-Sport Aviation Branch in Oklahoma City has posted the current sport pilot examiner list by aircraft category on its website, <http://afs600.faa.gov/afs610-Examiners.htm>. Branch Manager Marty Weaver added, "We have been receiving letters from Flight Standards District Offices (FSDOs) around the country extending sport pilot examiner privileges to existing designated pilot examiners (DPEs). There seems to be a growing interest by DPEs to get involved with the program."

The next sport pilot examiner course begins on March 21 in Sebring, Florida. Eight candidates have been invited to participate. For a list of upcoming sport pilot examiner courses, visit the *afs600* website, and click on "Sport Pilot Examiner Course Schedule 2005."

to involve the examiner in the flight just as you would a passenger. Ask the examiner to look for traffic and clear your turn if you have a blind spot. During oral questioning, ask for clarification if you are not sure about the question. Don't over-explain answers. If you are asked what time it is, tell the time; don't explain how the clock works. If the examiner wants more detail, let him or her ask for it.

If you are taking the test at an unfamiliar airport, ask the examiner to brief you about any special procedures. After all, that's what you would do if you were by yourself. Brief the examiner about seat belt use and door operation (if you have one), just like you would a passenger. If at any time you are in doubt about what is expected, speak up.

The PTS list four areas of unsatisfactory performance that can result in failing the test. Paraphrased, these are:

1. The examiner must take control to maintain safe flight. (If the examiner yells, "I've got the plane," you've had it!)

2. Failure to look for other traffic or to clear turns. (Ask for help; that's acceptable.)

3. Consistently exceeding tolerances stated in the objectives.

4. Failure to take prompt corrective action when tolerances are exceeded.

Foul-up on items 1 or 2, and your practical test is over. With items 3 and 4, if things get out of hand, take immediate action to fix the problem. Don't just quit. On any other flight, you would always adjust and correct your error. Do the same thing on your practical test. If you consistently have to make corrections you may be in trouble, but don't give up unless the examiner tells you the test is over.

Approach the practical test as a chance to strut your stuff. Pretend you are taking a special person for a ride and impress him or her with your professionalism. Yes, a sport pilot is as professional as any other pilot. Work hard, but don't let test jitters work hard on you.

You are the pilot in command—don't forget it. 



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