



You Want to Fly? Where to Start?©

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I am seeing more and more the question “I think I want to be a career pilot, how do I do that?” This short write-up describes how you could get the qualifications for a job being paid to fly! How fun will that be?

There are a few different pilot certifications with which to start; [ultralight recreational, sport or private](#). Sport, recreational and ultralight have limitations, but Sport pilot can be a stepping stone to get you flying faster on your way to private pilot certification. You will need your private pilot certificate (the FAA does not issue “licenses”) to fly anything for hire, so I’ll address the private pilot certificate here.

The first step should be an FAA medical. If you have medical issues it can take month or longer to work through the system and get cleared to fly. Do not invest in flight lessons if your medical situation would prohibit ever actually being able to fly by yourself. If you suspect medical concerns, join [AOPA](#) (first 6 months free) and consult their medical experts. There are three classes of medical and third class is all you need to start. Second and first class are for different types of jobs being paid as a pilot. You can look up FAA Authorized Medical Examiners (AME) on the [FAA website](#), search “site:faa.gov ame”. If concerned about what the medical covers, you can review the [FAA medical certifications](#) regulation.

The next step is to go to a local airport and take what is commonly called a “Discovery Flight”. This counts as a flight lesson and is often offered at a discounted price, to get you excited for more. Different schools offer different prices for the first or discovery flight. You can take discovery flights at multiple schools and all those flights should be captured in your log book, they count.

Decide on a school. There are basically two types of schools, referred to as part 61 and part 141; the word “part” refers to the federal regulations which dictate how these schools operate. The basic difference is that part 61 is more able to provide training at your pace and schedule (free lance) while part 141 is more of a structured curriculum and pace. That is not to imply that part 61 does not follow a syllabus or is anything less, it is just two different approaches. You can [learn more here](#).

One of the first things you do once you start with a school is [complete the application process](#) to obtain your student pilot certificate. This is purely a procedure done online with you and any instructor (others are authorized, but an instructor is usually most convenient). You receive a temporary student pilot certificate while the FAA completes its process and sends you a permanent plastic card, which never expires! There are age restrictions; 16 years old for student

pilot to fly solo (necessary on the path to private pilot) and 17 years old to receive your private pilot certificate.

The first milestone defined by the FAA is a written exam, all pilot certificates require an applicable written exam ([FAA details for written exam](#)). In order to take the written exam you need an approval which validates you are ready to take the exam. This approval can come from your flight instructor or any of the authorized ground schools. There are many ground schools available, including live and online. Some take a “read this” approach, others provide videos (like a talking head) and a few online schools include interactive online lessons.

I prefer and recommend interactive online lessons because they provide the best engagement to help assure a successful learning experience, while being available on your specific schedule. There are some which try to teach you “to the test”. They have a question bank and drill until you know the answers. This used to work because the FAA published the questions, they no longer do. The “study to the test” is not my recommended approach because you minimize your opportunity to learn useful information. The exams are constantly reviewed and revised in order to remain applicable to the current environment. Learning the material will make you better prepared as a pilot, please consider taking the time to learn and not memorize.

Once the written is passed (a score of 70% is minimum) you have two years to complete your flight training. After two years you will have to take the written exam again. For this reason I recommend you not take the written until you have some flight training completed. Having some flight training completed also helps relate much of the written exam materials to real world experience.

With your medical and written complete, all you need to is complete your flight training and take a practical exam. The flight training requirement minimum is 40 hours composed of a number of FAA specified activities (such as cross country (over 50 miles) flights and night flying). The specifics of flight experience required are documenting in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) under part 14 section [61.109](#). While the FAA requires a minimum of 40 hours, you should expect to acquire more. The current national average is more like 60-70 hours. This is affected by the frequency of lessons and practice. The more frequent the lessons the more the learning can “stick”. There are students who are ready for their practical with just over 40 hours, and others who have nearly 100 hours, each person is different.

While talking of hours, it’s important to understand that “after X hours you are NOT necessarily ready for something”. It is an occasional student query about having some number of hours and thus being ready to fly solo or take the practical test. The decision for a student to solo is based on an instructors (called the CFI for Certificated Flight Instructor) assessment. The CFI must decide the student is

capable and competent to not only fly the plane, but handle the airspace, communications and possible emergencies. Sometime the CFI believes the student ready and the student does not! The same applies to taking the practical.

Once you have the required skills and hours and your CFI believes you ready, you are then approved to take the practical. The practical is broken into two parts; the oral exam and the checkride. Sometimes people refer to the checkride but mean both the oral and checkride since they typically occur at the same time. In order to take the practical your CFI must authorize it. Then, on the scheduled date you take the practical. Passing the practical makes you a new private pilot authorized to fly on your own. Congratulations!

But even if private pilot is your end objective please remember the FAA written and practical defines the minimum required performance to qualify for your pilot certification. You should continue to practice what you have learned and find opportunities to learn more. Piloting is an interesting privilege; the skills and techniques you do not practice and exercise fade in atrophy. Every flight holds opportunity to practice something, please try to do so. Fly safe and keep learning which makes you a better and safer pilot. Again, congratulations on accomplishing something which puts you into a small elite group of people who fly!

After obtaining your Private Pilot certificate, you repeat the process for the Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) rating. Then you do it one more time for your Commercial Pilot certification. With that you can work for a company and receive pay for flying (what fun!) To fly commercial planes would require the Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificate. The ATP requires 1500 hours of flight experience. Most people get their 1500 either doing a commercial pilot job or instructing. To instruct you would need to repeat the process for Certificated Flight Instructor (CFI) and possibly Certificated Flight Instructor Instrument (CFII). As a CFI/CFII you get to log the hours you spend in flight with students.

This brief overview informs a potential flight student about the process of becoming a pilot and the milestones along the way.