



# The Written Exam: Obstacle or Opportunity<sup>©</sup>

Gary Palmer Nov 8 2021

Many, if not all, of us have heard a CFI or fellow pilot say “just pass the written and get it out of the way.” Or that the written has “no bearing on reality” or it is outdated or one of several other negative comments. I won’t argue their facts are wrong, but I disagree with their assessment. My objective is for new pilots to become proficient and knowledgeable; doing so should also make them safe.

Proficiency is not about being able to just “do a maneuver” but to do it consistently safe and within the FAA criteria. While it is good the FAA sets standards, they have to consider what can “hit the mark” to be passing. Just like schools have a standard, so does the FAA; below a 70% grade is considered failure to show knowledge, comprehension or mastery of a topic. The FAA sets a minimum acceptable performance, enough to show some understanding.

For the Airman Certification Standard (for flight capabilities) the FAA sets an equivalent failure mark. There is an old joke “What do you call the medical student who graduated last in her class? Doctor.” The same is true for pilots. There is no distinction made for a grade of 70 or 100 on an FAA written exam. Your examiner covers topics you missed, but anything 70 and above is a “pass”. Doctors, on-the-other-hand, are required to continue their learning throughout their career.

If knowledge is power, then the more knowledge you acquire the more powerful you can get. In this case, power is the ability to fly while understanding a lot about the plane and the airspace in which you fly. You have a choice of studying to get the minimum passing grade or studying to learn and comprehend the material. Remember that every time you fly, there is at least one life in your hands. Yes, the technology is changing and there are some questions which seem out of date. The FAA is regularly reviewing the exam questions to maintain current applicable focus. Some of the questions may not apply to you specifically, for now; but the future may offer you other options.

Similarly, some schools advise and even teach to the test. It’s almost at a level of memorizing answers. This may have been possible in the past, but the FAA no longer publishes questions; beware schools which offer a bounty if you tell them questions you encountered which they did not have in their memorization materials. Memorizing can pass the test, but offers little if any long term learning.

Is the written exam an obstacle or opportunity? Obstacle implies something to be passed either over or around, I offer that as the wrong perspective. The written exam defines a scope of knowledge that the test applicant should master.

Viewing the written as an opportunity to learn or review topics helps reinforce learning and teaches deeper comprehension of subject matter. The FAA knows the importance and relevance of content; it seems at odds for some to suggest these tests are an obstacle or useless. This is a case of opinion versus research. FAA research has shown the applicability of the written exam. The facts are that the FAA wants you to learn and be a better pilot and the written exam is one accomplishment along the path. You have the option of using it as a learning opportunity, which can be more enjoyable than thinking of it as an obstacle to overcome.

Studying to answer questions by rote memorization teaches little and is proven ineffective for retention. Those topics which your instructor never discusses, or barely covers, remain unknowns to you. Personally, I do everything possible to never face an unknown while flying. Each written exam is your opportunity to learn and comprehend more, both in depth and breadth. The motivation is yours, I doubt a passenger will ever ask how you did on your exam.