



## Interviewing Your CFI<sup>©</sup>

Gary Palmer Jan 11 2023

The question is simply how experienced and knowledgeable should your CFI be?

This is a true discussion told by a new CFI on 5-January 2023...

CFI: Passed my CFI Check ride today and it feels amazing!! Started school on May 2nd 2022 with 0 time!

More details: “about 230 hours excluding any sim time and about 10 hours solo”.

When asked about getting more experience the reply was something like “The FAA decided I was good enough to teach, so I will, thank you.”

Would you feel safe knowing this person was teaching you? There is an old joke about the doctor who graduates last in the class still being called doctor. The difference is residency, experience and the medical group the doctor works with.

So how do you find the CFI who is right for you? Interview them to find the right fit.

This article provides several questions designed to help you, a new student pilot, get a perspective about an instructor’s skill and capability. You should find a good match or at least have insight about the skill level and experience of your prospective CFI. After each question I explain why I think the information matters. There is no actual way to objectively assess skill, but hours are a good gauge.

### **Question: How many overall hours of flight time do you have?**

Simply an indicator of experience. With under 500 hours I did not realize all I did not know. Experience is what happens when you teach and fly, not when you read or pass an exam. There is a common concern that the first few hundred hours are where cocky attitudes or lack of experience cause unnecessary risk. Read “[The Killing Zone](#)” for a lot of insight on this. A student recently commented about having an engine out right after takeoff and the instructor took the controls, at 700 feet, and tried to return to the airport. That poor choice was possibly made due to a lack of experience. Luckily, they survived the crash and the student’s broken back has healed.

### **Question: Is it your intent to go to the airlines or to elsewhere in the profession when you have sufficient hours and experience?**

This is to make you aware of how long this CFI might be around. They can gain nearly 1000 hours in a year (toward the coveted 1500), so make your plans. Also, read the “CFI Selection” article at <http://www.timetoflyplanes.com/flight-training> which provides more

insight to CFI motivations. Some CFIs want a career teaching because that is their reward, others are teaching to build hours.

**Question: How long did it take you to get your CFI certificate?**

Again, someone who raced through the process did not avail themselves of opportunities to learn from experience. A CFI is required to have 250 hours total time including 10 hours solo. That is the lowest acceptable level the FAA will tolerate. The CFI has to learn through experience and a low hour CFI will likely use you to pay for that experience. With a low hour CFI, you will likely get a “by the book” education and probably enough to pass your practical, but would you feel comfortable taking family and friends flying? I hope you think not.

**Question: How long have you been a CFI and how many hours do you have instructing?**

This is about experience. If they have only a few hours it is a red flag. If they have lots of hours teaching, but just not flight training then it is a good sign they should be able to teach, and that is half the challenge for a CFI. If they have only been a CFI for a couple months (or less) they may not yet have developed the skills for instruction. Something most CFIs are not taught is about “shadowing” the controls. That term is mine and a few others, but not necessarily standard. It means that while the student is flying the CFI has a hand very close to the controls in order to take control quickly. Two recent fatal accidents involving new CFIs may have a contributing factor that the CFI did not take control quick enough.

**Question: How much solo time do you have?**

This is simply how much time they have flown where they are the ONLY person in the plane and thus fully responsible for the flight. Over 100 is a good start. While true that a non-pilot passenger means it is not solo time, solo is an indicator. This could be followed up with how many hours or flights simply with passengers and other non-pilot types. Someone who only and ever flew either solo or with other pilots is trying to move through pilot certifications as quickly as possible and may not be learning some of the details of good piloting or teaching.

**Question: How much cross country time do you have?**

This helps you understand overall experience. Some instructors spend all their time with students doing the same lessons time after time. They are less familiar with other areas and even other airports.

**Question: How much of your CFI time has been spent teaching ground school versus flight training?**

This calmly tries to discover if the CFI is looking to build hours. Lots of flight time and few ground hours can indicate a “let’s just go fly” mind set. You want time on ground before and after each lesson so you know what you’ll do and review what you just did. Ground school is important. If the CFI suggests you “just take an online ground school and get it over with” then they are not looking to help you learn and are looking to reduce teaching hours they cannot log. There are good ground schools available, and they work WITH the CFI to help the CFI see where you need help as well as monitor your progress.

**Question: Do you prefer using your familiar airports for cross country?**

Again, the cross country time is related to using the same airports all the time which implies the CFI consistently does cross country the same way. A cross country is simply a 50 nautical mile flight from takeoff to landing. If they use any of several, that is much better than “I have these 3 favorites”. A few is not necessarily bad, but it can indicate little knowledge of other areas. How it could affect you is if you want to go to Santa Ynez because one of your flying objectives is to visit family there, then that should be a cross country destination (assuming you are starting from one of the Los Angeles locations). But if the CFI always sends students to Palomar or French Valley, it is not a lesson to fit your objectives. They may support Santa Ynez, but not understand the specific challenges it presents. Ask how many cross country airports they know of which are available. You can go to [airnav.com](http://airnav.com) and do an advanced search to find all the airports over 50 nautical miles, from your field; those are ALL your cross country candidates.

Tailor these questions or just craft your own now that you have more knowledge about things to watch for. Be objective and careful when interviewing a CFI who will teach you to fly!

Additional references:

<https://www.flyingmag.com/you-can-fire-your-cfi/>

<http://www.timetoflyplanes.com/flight-training>