

Learning to Fly: How To *by Leia Fee*

Can I afford it? Is it hard? What about those written exams? Of you're thinking about learning or have recently embarked on a course of flying training the same questions have probably crossed your mind. They did mine.

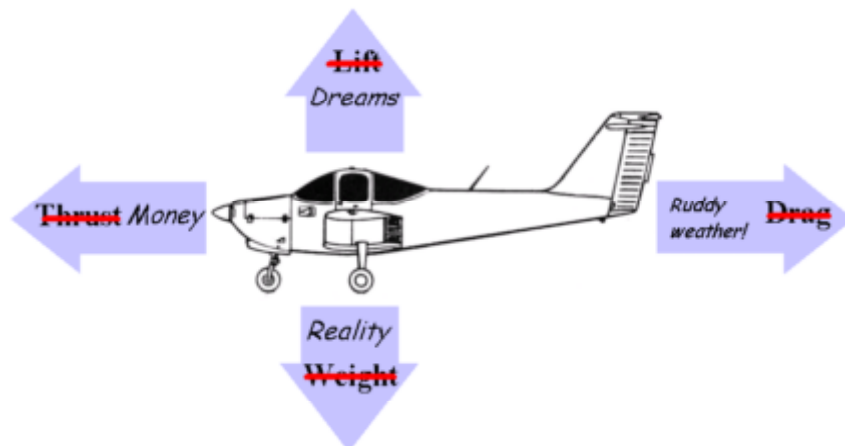
While training I found that discussing it on various forums and keeping the diary helped me think and put into words a bit better some of the things that helped and hindered, and thought it may be useful to write some of them down in a slightly more structured form. It helps, maybe that part of my job is teaching adults and while nothing to do with aviation the skills needed to learn effectively are the same no matter the subject.

This is not a "How To Fly An Aeroplane", because I'm not a flying instructor. It is a "How To **Learn** To Fly An Aeroplane." In fact from about halfway through it could be "How To Learn Almost Anything!"

With any luck some of the stuff in here will be useful to others. Feedback is, of course, welcomed.

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Money Money Money

At the time I started learning to fly, I was earning a few pence more than minimum wage. My trial lesson was birthday money, and it was six months later (with Christmas present money!) that I took my first 'proper' lesson. I was hooked, but dispirited by the dire warnings which would have one believe that it's all but impossible to learn anything unless you fly every week, which I knew I would not be able to afford.

Nonetheless I took the decision that any flying was better than none, and if I flew around with an instructor by my side once a month for the rest of my life it was still being in the air.

As it turned out nothing of the sort happened, and I passed in little more than the required minimum, albeit spread out over two and a half years!

So my tips for flying on a budget are:

- Don't be discouraged. You'll get there.
- Find a school which is prepared to be flexible - mine suggested I do half hour circuit sessions every week instead of an hour every other week, while I was trying to get solo and needed the regularity. They didn't bat an eyelid when my long cross-countries were followed by me disappearing all together until next payday.
- Work out exactly how much you can afford to spend on flying and **put it somewhere**. This might be an envelope under the bed, a separate bank account or anywhere else where it won't get frittered away on other things.
- Work out where you can save extra flying money. It all adds up. I realised when trying to budget, that a sarnie, packet of crisps and can of pop for lunch each day came to £60 worth by the end of the month -- over half an hour's more flying!
- Make the most of the time between lessons. Re-reading the text book costs nothing. Nor does rehearsing your checklists while sitting in the bath or your radio calls while on your way to work. (I also ending up pacing around my living room with the coffee tables as a 'runway' while trying to master overhead joins!)
- Buy equipment as you need it (the Starter Pack type deals are often false economy and full of stuff you won't use) and it consider whether you really **do** need things. Can you use your wristwatch instead of an expensive, complicated stopwatch from a specialist flying catalogue? A 50p clipboard from the local stationers instead of a bells and whistles kneeboard? Some things like a whizzwheel are must haves, but a lot of things aren't.
- Nail the exams first time if at all possible, money is better spent in the air than on resits.
- Visualising the manoeuvres can be a good way to keep them fresh if finances mean you can't fly as often as you want. (Imagining your way around the circuit or whatever) I'd been doing this for months before I discovered it's actually a recognised technique in sports coaching.

Flying Training

There is a roller coaster of "wheeee I'm flying" through "I'll never get the hang of this" up to "whhoooo SOLO!" back to "I'm going to get lost, I can't do this navigating lark" up to "Woweee Qualifying Cross Country" away to "Yikes I've got to do all this in front of an examiner" all the way to "Yeeeeehhhhaaa I passed!".

Or in other words - ups and down are normal, in more than the physical sense when learning to fly. So the first major tip is don't be surprised by this! Others things I'd advise:

- The choice of aeroplane is less important than the choice of school, as long as you're moderately comfortable. I need a cushion to sit on in a Cessna which is a bit undignified but not the end of the world. Tomahawks I thought looked cuter (and no cushion required), but the real decision was made by the fact that when my first lesson was cancelled because of the weather there were still loads of people sitting chatting at the club and everyone was friendly to a 'newbie'.
- Find an instructor you're compatible with. They run the whole gamut from shouting and brandishing clipboards to so laid back you wonder if they've nodded off in the right hand seat. Some people don't respond well to the first, while other would wonder if they were getting their money's worth from the second. Find what suits you. Most schools will be flexible if you request a specific instructor.
- However, don't be too daunted by flying with a different instructor occasionally. Remember your final GFT will probably be with someone new, and if it's the first time you've ever had anyone other than your usual instructor sitting next to you, it's going to add an unnecessary extra stress factor.
- Do your homework. Especially if you're on a budget - while you're paying almost £2 a minute is not the time to be struggling to remember something you could have learned in your armchair with a cup of coffee.
- However, (another one!), don't be surprised if your carefully learned by heart checklists and radio calls turn into fumbling confusion the first time you do them while flying the aeroplane at the same time. It will pass, it really will.
- There will be times when you feel like you're getting worse instead of better - you're not. It's just that your brain learns things more readily than your hands and feet. You're not suddenly making more mistakes - you're just spotting more of them now.
- In a similar vein, you will also find that things your instructor was quietly doing for you without you noticing become your job, also contributing to the feeling of having too much to do and not enough time to do it in! Again, it's not because you're getting worse it's because you're getting better and being given more to do as a result.
- Stay motivated. There are loads of wonderful inspirational flying books out there. Plenty of GA magazines about too, though you might need to find a larger bookshop that stocks most of them. Get yourself an airchart even if you're not onto the navigation sections of the course yet. Have a browse and make yourself lists of places you want to visit once you have the licence.

Nervous-Makers

Some things tend to get people in a twist and never turn out to be as bad as expected. The main ones are:

- **The Radio** - I've spoken English all my life and yet confronted by that little PTT button suddenly lost all ability to form coherent words. I am assured this is perfectly normal. Things that help:
 - Practice
 - Visiting ATC and seeing they are real people, not omnipotent voices in the ether.
 - Getting over the fear of sounding stupid, or getting things wrong. ATC will ask again if they didn't understand you or you forgot something.
 - Remembering that "Correction" is a wonderful and useful phrase, as is "Say again"...

- **First Solo** - Only natural to be nervous at this one! It's no small things to know that there's no one else at all to help you get that aeroplane back on the ground once it's up in the air! I was quite literally shaking in my boots while I waited at the hold. Weirdly enough it went away almost altogether once I was in the air. During that nervous wait at the hold the things I used to help settle the nerves were repeatedly telling myself:
 - The school want their aeroplane back -- the instructor wouldn't have sent me to do this if he thought there was much chance of me breaking it.
 - I'm not being asked to do anything I haven't done dozens of times over the past few weeks and months. In fact my instructor said more or less exactly that "Just fly it exactly the same as the others."
 - The instructor knows my ability better than I do -- it's his job to. If he says I can do it then I can do it.

- **What if I get lost** - Solo navigation is a great adventure, but understandably can be the source of some anxiety too. The main things to remember are:
 - The difference between being 'uncertain of position' and outright lost.
 - That there are people on the end of the radio ready and willing to help. I know at least one student who got uncertain of position on his QXC, called for help and still passed because he followed the correct procedures and handled the situation so well.
 - There's nothing wrong with orbiting a nice distinctive landmark while you figure out **which** nice distinctive landmark it is!

- **The Test** - Again, reasonably natural to be nervous about this. I was daunted as much by the length of it as anything - would I be able to maintain my concentration for so long through all those manoeuvres? The things I used to reassure myself were much the same as when I was contemplating the prospect of first solo:
 - My instructor knows better than I do what the test entails and thinks I can do it, so is probably right.
 - The examiner is not going to ask for anything I haven't done before.
 - They're looking for Safe -- not Biggles.
 - Further to those practical points, flying examiners seem to be a friendly bunch, the very thorough brief beforehand did more to settle my nerves than anything. Especially the bit about "If you do something wrong tell me about it and we'll have another go."

Learning Styles...

A buzzword or two next, because no matter what you're trying to learn it will come easier if you play to your strengths. That is, if you know your (buzzword alert) 'Learning Style'.

There are three main types: Visual, Aural and Physical. If you are a physical or aurally oriented learner, trying to memorise things by reading the book is going to be a slog.

There are a multitude of online surveys out there that will help you determine which method you favour (most people are a mixture) but the simplest, which I tell my learners about are to consider what you do when you're trying to remember a phone number or spell a word.

*If you try to picture it in your head you're probably a **visual** learner.*

To play to your strengths, make diagrams, charts of what you're trying to learn, get out the highlighter pens, use coloured sticky notes for key facts. Summarise information into pictorial or chart form whenever possible. When revising try to find a clear space, away from mess and clutter and visual distractions like having the telly on in the background.

*If you recite it out loud or 'sound out' the spelling you're probably an **aural** learner.*

Try reading bits of the textbooks out loud, or recording them for yourself. You may find the multimedia training CDs useful to listen to for the narration. Mnemonics will be probably be helpful, especially ones with a rhyme or rhythm to them. If there isn't one for the list you're trying to learn - make up your own! When revising find a quiet area or put some music on in the background to keep other noise out.

*If you remember the layout of the numbers on the keypad or find you have to actually write it down to find out if it seems right, then you're probably a **physical** learner.*

Make your own summary of key points from the textbooks -- the physical process of noting it down yourself will help commit it to memory. Keep your notes in a short form that you can carry around with you and look at on the go. Use sticky notes around the house so you can remind yourself of them while you're doing other things. Revise in short burst with time to physically move about and stretch your legs in between.

So what's all that got to do with flying?

Lots! To take a particularly glaring example - I'm a visual/physical learner - all the mnemonics that flying is littered with slip out of my memory like water off a duck. I can't remember BUMPFITCH and the like because I'm not 'hearing it' I'm picturing it and by the time I've visually conjured up the word and checked what the next letter is, I've forgotten what it stands for anyway!

So when I was trying to learn the pre-landing checks, I lay in bed and instead of trying to remember a list I tried to picture where each item was and how I'd have to move and stretch to reach things and what buttons I'd have to press etc.

My pre-landing check doesn't go BUMPFITCH. It goes, "Wriggle feet well down off the brakes and reach over to touch and check the mixture, fuel pump and carb heat which are all next to each other under my right hand there, and while I'm looking in that direction the engine gauges are over there, and on the subject of instruments the altimeter, compass and DI need checking too and the compass is up high above the windscreen and while I'm leaning back in my seat and craning my neck to look up at it, the doorlock for the hatches and harness bit of the check is up there as well so I can stretch up and check that, then pluck at my seatbelt and bring my hand back to the carb heat knob so I don't forget to put it off again.

Visual things and physical things.

Those written exams...

If, like a lot of student pilots, school seems a long time ago then the written exams can come as something of a shock to the system. In truth they're are not that bad. The learning styles discussed above will help you identify how best to commit that knowledge to memory in a form you can actually use and recall.

The problem with multiple choice

The exams are all multiple choice (4 possible answers). This is good in one way (25% chance of guessing right!), and problematic in another. The problem comes because it's tricky to make multiple choice exams sufficiently difficult and still give a range of feasible answers. There's a danger that the candidate will simply grab at any familiar bit of terminology. Hence the silly word games people complain of. When it seems like the tests are as more a test of English Grammar than knowledge -- that's why. What they're trying to do (with mixed success) is check you have a thorough enough understanding of the subject to reason out the answer -- not just remember it's "something to do with..."

For the same reason there'll often be two answers that are technically correct but where one is "better" than the other - more detailed, or more thorough. And to be bloody-minded there also ones where the 'extra bit' is a complete red herring.

Exam Technique

Another buzzword, I'm afraid. But another important one. It's quite possible to have all the required information and still make a dog's breakfast of an exam. How many times do you hear people say, "Oh I'm rubbish at exams." or "I just go to pieces." "It all goes out of my head." "I always run out time." "I make silly mistakes." Exam technique is a skill like any other, it can be learned and it can be improved on. Some tips:

Before the exam:

- Use practice papers, (PPL Confuser, AirQuiz, whatever) -- but use them **as revision**. They are not a learning aid, they're a way to test what you know. Learning the answers to the specific questions is less important than knowing why you got it wrong.
- Time yourself on the practice papers. It's no good being able to get everything right if it takes you two hours instead of one to do so.
- While timing yourself, give yourself a good 30%, maybe as much as half, **less** time than the real exam -- the practice papers are inevitably going to be more familiar than the real thing. You'll do them quicker. You'll also find that things will take longer under the stress of the actual exam. You'll get muddled and have to reread things, you'll second guess yourself and go back to change answers, you'll suddenly lose count in the middle of calculations. The brain does odd things under stress, so allow for it.
- Make notes as you go through the practice papers of things you don't feel a 100% certain of, and want to revise. You might get it right but still be hazy about why.
- While doing the practice papers, if you find yourself having to guess an answer then leave it out and mark it wrong. You should mark yourself against the worse case scenario... you don't want to rely on guesses in the real thing, so don't set yourself up with a false sense of security.

On the day of the exam:

- Sleep and eat properly. You may be nervous, but try anyway -- you wouldn't fly hungry and tired (I hope), so don't go into an exam in that state. Brains work best when they're fed and rested.
- Stop revising! It sounds odd, but I really mean it -- looking up a specific fact is all right, anything more is a bad idea. If you do discover something you genuinely don't know just before the exam it's too late to learn it, and you'll just make yourself nervous and damage your chances of doing well in the bits you **do** know.
- Make sure you've got everything you need before you leave the house. Rushing around at the last minute for pens and whizzwheels will not put you in a good frame of mind.

During the exam:

- Skim read through the whole thing before you start. Double check how much time you have and how many questions there are. The same marking sheet is used for lots of different papers so don't panic if you see there's 60-odd boxes for answers on it! You may only be using 20 of them this time.
- You don't have to do the questions in the order they are on the paper. Do the easy ones you feel confident about first. Mark the ones you want to go back to clearly though -- don't forget them!
- The questions that you know are going to take longer, you might want to leave until the end, especially anything that involves calculations or working out. In the Navigation exam in particular it's worth rattling through the purely theory questions before the flight planning element.
- Read the question. Then read it again. Silly word games remember! Same goes for the answers.
- Take care with mathematical questions - the examiners are a sly bunch and will include in the answers an option which matches the result you get if you do the sum back to front or make one of the other common errors.
- Make sure you've marked the correct box. There's nothing more frustrating than losing a mark for a question you **knew** the answer to! Take particular care in air law when the answer is about airspace classes. "Class A airspace" might not be Answer A! (A mistake I really did make myself...)
- If you have time at the end (and you should be aiming to), read back over your answers, check them, and check you've marked the right box (again)
- Only change your mind about an answer if you're **certain** you've got it wrong, or realise you misread the question. If you're in doubt, hold off second guessing yourself. If you do know the answer somewhere in the depths of your memory, it'll probably be the first one that came to mind. The human brain is like that.
- If you're finished and you've checked your work -- leave. Too many rereads and the doubt sets in and you start convincing yourself that a right answer might be wrong after all.

After the exam:

- While it's fresh in your mind, make a note about any questions that you weren't certain about. If you've been unlucky and failed it'll give you a clue as to the areas to revise.
- If you've passed, check the things you weren't sure of anyway -- you're going to be flying out in the real world one day and it might be something important!

And the finally the most important tip for learning to fly...

Have Fun!

I've had some wonderful trips since getting my PPL but some of the flights I look back on with the biggest grin were ones I did while training.

Don't waste it. Don't rush through it as if it's a chore on the way to the 'real' flying. Enjoy the views, laugh at your instructor's jokes, drink the coffee and commiserate about the weather with other students and pilots when Rain Stops Play.

However many amazing flights you do you'll never a get another first, "I can see my house from here", or "Wowee that's a cloud **underneath** me!" or "My instructor really didn't touch the controls once during that landing".

Flying is full of frustrations and triumphs -- little ones and big ones, and there's something to be learned and gained from all of them, and that doesn't change in the slightest once you have that coveted PPL!



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