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Know *the* Score:

What to Know Before Your Check Ride

Sweat rolls down your brow and has long since soaked through your shirt. Your chest feels tight, to the point that you wonder if it's about to choke off all air flow to your lungs. Your hands are so tightly clenched on the yoke that you're surprised the yoke hasn't cracked and broken under the pressure.

Why all the stress? It's just the most important landing of your life. No, there are not 200 people seated behind you in the aircraft. In fact, there's only one other person in the aircraft — the FAA's designated pilot examiner (DPE) — and that individual is administering your very first check ride. The DPE

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sitting next to you is charged with evaluating whether you have what it takes to qualify as a fully-fledged certificated pilot. The DPE first takes you through an oral exam that, from your point of view, is a brutal interrogation. And now, this maniacal mystery pilot wants you to perform an endless list of maneuvers and tasks in flight, inch perfect. How could anyone pass?

Removing the Mystery

First things first. Keeping it in perspective can help you manage, even reduce, the stress level occasioned by your initial check ride. Just remember that even if you don't pass on the first try, you can always retake the check ride. It also helps to understand that the pilot administering the check isn't mysterious, malicious, or even mean spirited. But theirs is a serious job: They

are entrusted with the responsibility of making sure you meet the aeronautical knowledge and aeronautical skill standards established in the United States for the certificate you are seeking to obtain. When the DPE signs your temporary pilot certificate, he or she is attesting that you are competent not only to carry yourself aloft — something you've already been doing during solo practice — but also to carry passengers.

A second way to reduce check-ride stress is to remove some of the mystery of the process. There is certainly no mystery as to the range of questions to answer and maneuvers the DPE will expect you to demonstrate, because they are all outlined in the FAA's Practical Test Standards, or PTS. Every certificate the FAA issues has some form of practical test; there is a published PTS for each one. The PTS lists both the subjects to be addressed in the oral exam and the maneuvers you should be able to execute. It also includes a checklist of what you, the applicant, should bring to the test.

While we'd all like everything we do on the check ride to be perfect, reality often gets in the way. One of the most helpful parts of the PTS is that it provides a range of limits, or parameters, for what constitutes a passing performance. For example, in steep turns you must maintain your entry altitude +/- 100 feet (in addition to other requirements).

Think of the PTS as the rulebook for your check ride. Stay inside the rules and you pass. It's that simple. FAA provides all the pilot PTS documents at no charge online at: http://www.faa.gov/training_testing/testing/airmen/test_standards/pilot/

How the Salami Gets Made

For the sake of this article, we'll have to make a couple of assumptions because the process differs somewhat depending on how you're training. For the purposes of this discussion, let's assume you are training under part 61.

Let's imagine that you're getting close to completing your training. The check-ride process begins when your instructor tells you it's time to schedule this rite of passage with a DPE. As you probably gathered from the earlier discussion, DPEs are flight instructors who are authorized by FAA to conduct check rides on the basis of their skill and experience. They usually charge a fee for their time on a per-test basis. DPEs conduct almost all private-pilot check rides. If you do not wish to use a DPE, you may request a check ride from an FAA Aviation Safety Inspector (ASI). To take that route, however, you would need a fairly compelling reason. The wait can be long because resources at the local Flight Standards District Office are limited. Most people prefer to go with a DPE.

How do you find a DPE? Many flight schools have a list of DPEs in the local area. But you can also search online at: <http://av-info.faa.gov/DesigneeSearch.asp>. It's a good idea to ask around and see if some of the other pilots in your area have suggestions. After that, you or your flight school will schedule the exam with the DPE.

Now, it's time to get ready. You may want to practice by finding a different instructor to give you a practice check ride. Take it seriously. Treat the practice check ride just as you would approach the actual check ride. This dress rehearsal serves several purposes. First, it gives you a chance to get used to the experience of being evaluated. Second, it gives you a chance to get feedback from a different instructor, which could further sharpen your skills. Third, it might help you gain experience flying with an unfamiliar pilot in the right seat.

Take a Deep Breath

On the appointed day, you meet the examiner. Confidence comes from knowing the standards, and knowing that you have already flown to those standards in order to get your instructor's recommendation for the test. Remember that the DPE is a person who has been where you are right now, probably many times. It's worth asking the DPE what you can expect in terms of his or her approach, although most will provide that information at the beginning. A DPE is required to conduct the check ride in accordance

with FAA standards and procedures, but all people are different and it helps to know what to expect.

Concentrate on answering each question to the best of your ability. In the airplane, focus on each maneuver as you fly and try not to fret about the next maneuver or about mistakes you think you made on the last activity. If you are not sure what the examiner is asking you to do, ask for clarification. That's part of being pilot in command and, after all, the check ride is your first flight as PIC. Don't increase your stress by trying to guess what the DPE is thinking. As with people in the general population, some DPEs are more gregarious than others. A DPE who is mostly silent is not sending you a message of disapproval. Just remember that if you complete a maneuver and the DPE moves on without comment, it most likely means you're doing fine. You will know if you have not performed in a satisfactory way. If you have failed a maneuver, the DPE must tell you that and give you the option of terminating the flight or continuing in order to get credit for the remainder of the maneuvers that are performed satisfactorily.

Finally, try to relax. Take a deep breath and execute the plan, just as you have done throughout your training. Remember, the DPE or ASI doesn't want to see you fail. Their job is simply to determine that you are ready for those wings. Good luck and happy flying! ✈️

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Photo by Susan Parson