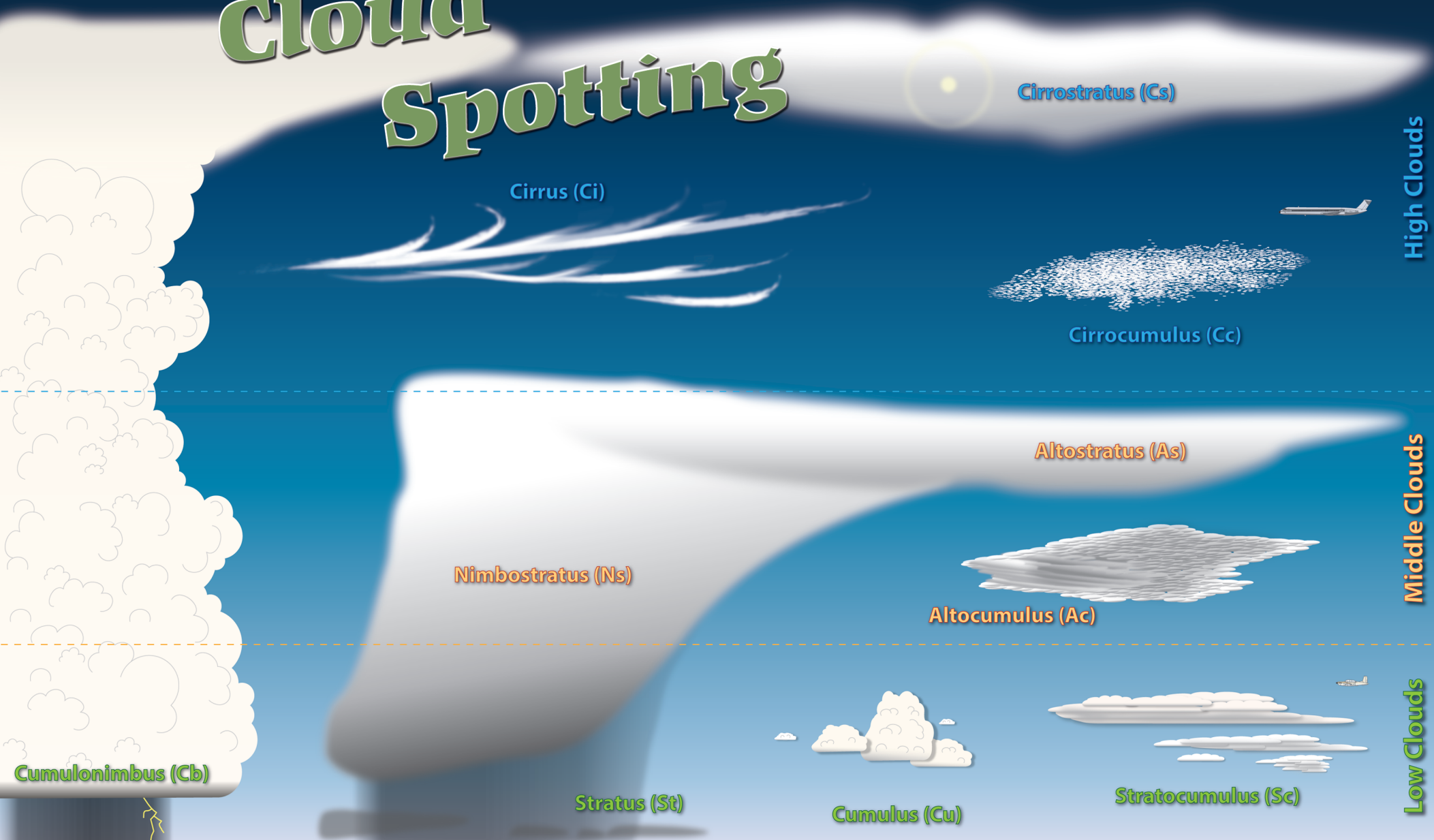


Cloud Spotting

Reading the Signposts of the Sky



High Clouds

10,000 ft. – 60,000 ft. AGL

Middle Clouds

6,500 ft. – 13,000 ft. AGL

Low Clouds

Surface – 6,500 ft. AGL

Paul Cianciolo

Cirrus

These wispy filament-like clouds form mostly white patches or narrow bands in high-altitude stable air. They are composed of ice crystals and their transparent character depends upon the degree of separation of the crystals.



Cirrocumulus

These thin, layered clouds without shading are composed of very small elements in the form of regularly arranged grains or ripples. Generally, they represent a degraded state of cirrus and cirrostratus clouds and are uncommon.



Cirrostratus

These transparent, whitish veil clouds with a fibrous (hair-like) or smooth appearance usually cover the whole sky. During the day, they are thin enough to still see shadows on the ground and can produce a halo around the sun or moon.



Altocumulus

These white/gray patch or layered clouds have a roll-like appearance and can cause some turbulence and small amounts of icing. This common middle cloud often appears at different levels at the same time and with other cloud types.



Altostratus

These gray/bluish layers totally or partially cover the sky, with the sun being dimly visible. They are frequently associated with approaching frontal systems and contain little or no turbulence and moderate amounts of icing.



Nimbostratus

These clouds result from thickening altostratus layers, are dark gray, and diffused by falling rain or snow. The cloud base lowers as precipitation continues. Low, ragged clouds frequently occur beneath, which may merge with its base.



Cumulus

These puffy clouds are formed of liquid water droplets near the ground and can be turbulent. Over land, they develop on clear days due to daytime convection. They typically appear in the morning, grow, and then dissipate in the evening.



Stratocumulus

These gray or whitish patch, sheet, or layered clouds almost always have dark tessellations (honeycomb appearance), rounded masses, or rolls. They are often found in marine environments and can form from the breakup of stratus layers.



Stratus

These “good IFR” clouds tend to be smooth but moderate icing and some turbulence may exist. Stratus layers have a uniform base, which, if thick enough, may produce drizzle, ice, or snow.



Cumulonimbus

These towering giants can produce tornados, thunderstorms, lightning, hail, icing conditions, and devastating turbulence. The FAA recommends keeping a distance of 20 nautical miles from these clouds.



The cloud graphic has been adapted from NOAA's National Weather Service.