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Learning to Fly: Your First Flying Lesson

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You've selected a flight school, arranged your schedule and finances so that you have enough time and money available to learn to fly, and now you've booked your first flying lesson. At last the big day arrives. The weather god has ordained a clear, calm day. You're excited and a little scared: It's show time.

At the airport you meet your chosen instructor, Andy. You hope you have selected well because you are about to trust your life to him.

It is too soon for you to know this, but flight instructors must pass at least four rigorous written, oral and flight examinations in order to offer you their services. The FAA treats instructors very seriously: Certificated flight instructor (CFI) certificates are the only ones that expire if not renewed. You will be in competent hands.

Andy briefs you on what you will do today, but you already know because you bought the course materials and read today's lesson in advance. The plan is to learn how to use a checklist to inspect and start the airplane, then taxi to the run-up check area, take off, fly, and, oh, yes, land.

Preflight checks and the checklist

Together you walk out to the airplane. You may not have seen a small airplane up close many times before. You are about to see it even closer as Andy hands you the preflight inspection checklist. "In God we trust", he says, "but everything else we check."

Starting in the cockpit, he guides you as you remove the control lock, turn on the master switch and extend the flaps. You check the landing light, anti-collision strobes and rotating beacon, making sure the aircraft's master switch is off before starting the exterior preflight.

Checklist in hand, you walk around the airplane and check everything external — control surfaces, antennas, landing gear, fuel level and fuel caps secure, oil, the works, in a systematic way that omits nothing.

Mostly Andy talks while you check. You realize that he is trying to pass his knowledge through your head to your hands. It is the mark of a master teacher. The more that sticks in your head, the faster you will progress.

Exterior preflight complete, you take your seat on the left, Andy on the right. He shows you

where the fire extinguisher is and how to use it. Then he shows you how to use your seat belt, and how to operate the doors.

Engine start is again done from the checklist. Now Andy shows you how to taxi with the rudder pedals, brakes and throttle. With his help, but less and less, you steer the airplane to the run-up area where you will perform necessary preflight checks: flight controls, engine run-up, instruments, trim and more. Andy explains all and finally it is done. Time to take off.

It's time to take off

You taxi the airplane onto the runway. It seems to extend forever, and for the moment it's all yours. With Andy's guidance, and his hands on his own set of controls, you smoothly add full power. Engine's good, the airspeed indicator springs to life.

You are so mesmerized by all that's happening around you, all so new, that Andy has to begin pulling the yoke back at "rotation" speed, 55 knots. But your hands are working again, you add your own pull and suddenly the ground drops away and the runway disappears beneath the nose. You have just made your first takeoff. Oh, man.

Climbing out, Andy suggests an airspeed of 75 knots. To obtain this, he shows you how raising the nose lowers the airspeed and lowering it raises airspeed. You push and pull, but it doesn't make sense yet. No surprise here. You have never operated in three dimensions before! You watch as Andy pins the airspeed needle on 75 knots. He has "good hands" and you are envious. "I can't wait to fly like that", you think. You will.

You're still absorbing many new sounds and sights as Andy shows you how to level off and trim the airplane for straight and level flight as you head out to the practice area, a chunk of airspace designated for training.

Demonstrating stability and making turns

On the way he demonstrates the airplane's stability — how it tends to fly straight and level on its own. It seems the less he controls it, the better it flies. Hmm. Gotta ask about that later.

In the practice area, Andy asks you to watch as he demonstrates a gentle medium-banked turn (about 30 degrees of bank). Relax, there will be no roller-coaster maneuvers. Then he asks you to follow with him on the controls as he does another. Finally he asks you to do some turns by yourself. He offers suggestions and encouragement, but also is silent sometimes to let you sort things out and learn your own way.

Too soon it is time to head back, but you have no idea where the airport is! Andy obviously knows the area, and his sharp eyes pick out the airport. You don't see it until you are much closer, but hey, it's your first lesson and it's okay to cut yourself some slack.

Landing

Landing calls for another checklist and a descent. Andy explains, but not too much. He knows you are a little overwhelmed. As you reduce power, the airplane descends. Vigilant for other air traffic, Andy explains the basics as you enter the traffic pattern.

He calls something about being downwind, parallel to the runway on the left. Andy sets a little flap, then makes a left descending turn called a base leg. He sets more flap and reduces the power again.

Now you see the plan: He is going to land on those big numbers. Another left turn puts you on final approach and he adds the last of the flaps. A moment later, the ground rushes up, the airplane's nose rises and you feel a gentle bump. Hello, Mother Earth.

Off the runway, more checklists, park and secure the airplane. It's all done by long-established rite and ritual.

Lesson done, objective met, post-flight discussion. Andy makes the first entry of many in your logbook. You're on your way!

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