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# I'm a CFI **By** Matt Johnson

## Now What?

### Attributes of a Professional Flight Instructor

As an FAA designated pilot examiner (DPE), I'm often asked which flight exams I enjoy the most. To the surprise of many, it is the certified flight instructor (CFI) exam I enjoy giving the most.

Yes, the CFI exam is a long one, no doubt. However, it is very rewarding to see successful outcomes and what I consider to be the true "certificate to learn" issued to those applicants who have come prepared.

Most CFI applicants put an enormous amount of work into their academics and have polished their flying skills while sitting in "the other seat".

One of the greatest benefits of being a DPE is that you get the opportunity to become a mentor to new CFI's; after all, it is CFI's that will be preparing future up and coming pilots for flight exams.

Almost without fail, I am often asked by CFI's "now what"? Sometimes this happens before the ink is dry on their temporary airmen certificate and sometimes later on when the newly minted CFI acquires his/her, first student.

Either way, the new CFI that asks for guidance and seeks mentorship is off to a great start in demonstrating the attributes of a professional flight instructor. So what advice do I have for all new CFI's? I recommend

five things to all CFI's, regardless of experience, to maintain a high level of integrity and professionalism when representing the industry.

### Being a Professional Pilot

It's not just showing up on time; a professional CFI shows up not only on time but also ready to help applicants achieve their goals. Any CFI that shows up to work and asks the student "what are we doing today" is doing a disservice to our industry.

Understanding your student's strengths and weaknesses and knowing where they are at their particular stage of training is a key factor in everyone's success. You are not there just to "build time" you are there to help students log valuable lessons, lessons that you are getting paid to give!

Along with a good pre-flight briefing, post-flight briefings are a critical component to your student's success. The material is recent and with the experience fresh in the student's mind they are more likely to absorb more when reviewed after a flight.

Push your students to keep a "flight journal"; have them write down what you covered on the ground, in-flight maneuvers, what went right and what needs work. And just importantly, you as the CFI should keep a flight journal to track your progress

and continued growth as a flight instructor. You must lead by example in all that you do and say.

Part of being a professional CFI is taking your students to a higher level of proficiency and understanding and not just some arbitrary "minimum" standards established by the FAA or flight school. The influence you have on your students will last throughout their career, whether it is as a career pilot or as a private owner of an aircraft and company. Think about that the next time you see your physician, did he or she just meet "minimum standard" in medical school? I would sure hope not!

### Know Your Aircraft

Knowing your aircraft inside and out is paramount. If you don't fully understand your aircraft and it's associated systems you can't properly instruct a student on that aircraft. Period!

Over the past several years, I have witnessed first-hand many student weaknesses on now basic aircraft systems work. While I agree the student must meet their instructor half-way, the instructor is the "expert" that the student is looking up to for guidance. No matter how basic your training helicopter may be, it has associated systems, and you owe it to your student to empower them on how they work.



On several occasions, I have reconfigured simple things on an aircraft before an applicant begins their preflight during a flight exam. Simply shutting the fuel valve to “off” has caused many applicants a great deal of stress, confusion and embarrassment when (if) they figure out why they couldn’t sump the gascolator. As another example, I frequently turn the cabin heater blower motor to “on”. It is astonishing to see the different results from applicants when they turn the master switch on only to hear an “abnormal” noise coming from the helicopter “that they have never heard before.” I have witnessed about everything imaginable including an applicant that said he heard it but didn’t know what the noise was but elected to proceed with the engine starting sequence. Needless to say, the aeronautical decision-making portion of the exam did not end favorably. In examples, a basic overview and understanding of the helicopters systems would have had much less consternation on the part of the applicant.

One of the most educational experiences you can give your

students is to have him, or her observe an annual or 100-hour inspection when all the cowlings are removed. A good mechanic will take the time to point out the various systems and explain things that may not normally be covered during regular lessons. And while students are taking part in this exercise, you as the CFI encourage to take lots of pictures of the aircraft to have a good lesson library for future ground sessions.

### Pilot Endorsements

You put a lot of hard work into earning your CFI, so don’t lose it. The endorsements you sign off on for your students are important. Federal Regulations even require you to track and maintain what endorsements you have given over the last 3-year period. Students are in essence flying on your name and certificate. How do you handle (endorse) an individual who already possess a certificate in another category and class? What endorsement do you provide him or her to “solo” the aircraft? The endorsements necessary for a primary student (non-rated pilot)

and an already rated pilot are totally different. If a student pilot happens to get ramped checked on a solo cross country and they don’t have the correct endorsement you can expect a phone call or visit. Take the time to make the correct and necessary endorsements.

While it is not an all-inclusive document, the FAA has done a reasonably good job with Advisory Circular that provides recommended endorsements. The most recent version (61-65F) released this past February is a major improvement over past versions. They even included the SFAR 73 endorsements for those training in the Robinson R22 or R44. This Advisory Circular should be a key component of every CFI’s library of resources.

### Forming Good Habits

Remember that “Law of Primacy” that you learned about when studying for your CFI? Of all of the “laws of learning” that we study and teach I feel this principle is critical to the success of your students.

Teaching good habits from the beginning doesn’t have to be difficult.





Consider this: work a weight and balance for every flight, change the weights to configure other than “normal” situations. Additionally, work a “performance” for every flight with figuring density altitude, pressure altitude, In and Out of Ground Effect ceilings, etc.

I realize the student won't be doing that on day/lesson number one, but I feel it is paramount that they see YOU taking responsibility for the flight by determining the parameters. It breeds confidence and good habits.

Proper and thorough pre-flights are an absolute must and as an instructor, you must be stern and professional in ensuring that your students do an adequate pre-flight inspection of their aircraft before flight.

### Lessons Learned from Past Accidents

Sadly, the NTSB's database is filled with a multitude of “what not to do” when it comes to helicopter operations. Stay on top of industry accidents and trends. Consider using one or more accident reports as part of your lesson plan and

pre-flight briefing. Associated videos can be an excellent teaching tool. An unfavorable trend that I have observed is that applicants are generally weak on helicopter performance topics.

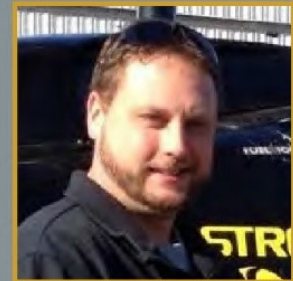
Much of this can be attributed to regional differences between relatively low MSL locations where students get primary training compared to that of high MSL regions. You may “discuss” high-Density Altitude operations, but until a pilot experiences it, they may not get a true appreciation of helicopter performance and limitations. The accident database is full of reports where pilots learned the “hard” way that their poor planning (or no planning) led to less than optimal performance.

### Summary

It's not a surprise that many new CFI's use their instructor certificate as a “time-building” opportunity. While I'm not overly thrilled with the “get your time and move on” mentality, it is a mainstay of our industry, and I don't see it changing in the near future.

Use this time to make the most of it by developing a reputation for being a true

professional. This reputation will follow you throughout your career endeavors. Even the newest of CFI's can be great instructors by taking their job serious and BEING PROFESSIONAL. 🚁



Matt Johnson is a Helicopter FAA Designated Pilot Examiner conducting Private through ATP level exams in numerous makes and models. His experience spans air medical, law enforcement, flight instruction, and ENG flying.

He is a three-time Master Instructor recipient, FAA Gold Seal Flight Instructor and FAAS Team Representative for the Greater Cincinnati Ohio Region. Additionally, Matt is an Air-Medical Pilot flying a single-pilot IFR Helicopter in SW Ohio.





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