

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT AVIATION TRAINING SCHOOL

Before you choose a flight school, it's a good idea to answer two key questions: Of the flight schools accessible to you locally, which appear to have best reputations for quality of training and customer care? And which of that group offers training most suitable to the kind of flying you have set as your goal?

Safety first! Reputation second.

Above all other considerations, a flight school's safety record and reputation may be the two most important pieces of information you'll want to consider when deciding where to complete your training.

You can visit potential schools and go for a facilities tour. This will give you a good overall sense of the operation, but you'll also want to ask some specific questions about the safety record of the school, how and where their aircraft are maintained, and what the defect reporting system looks like. Not only will you be safer training with a school who takes safety seriously, you'll be much better prepared for work in an industry where most companies place a high priority on safety.

A flight school's reputation can be a bit harder to suss out, as much of what you'll hear about a school is based on opinion, and not the facts of accident and incident reports. There are numerous online communities and forums where pilots will gather to chat, but we'll caution you to take anything you read online with a grain of salt. When considering a flight training school, you can ask to speak with some alumni of the school who have successfully entered the aviation industry as professional pilots. You can also talk to current students at the school to find out how they feel about their experience. When you meet professional pilots, ask them where they did their training and if they would recommend it. Most pilots will be happy to point you in the right direction.

If you're looking at training for a career as a professional pilot, you're about to make a significant investment of your time, your money, and your future. Any school that properly recognizes this will be happy to answer as many questions as you can ask and will connect you with the people who can get you the information you need to make an informed decision. Don't be afraid to ask the tough questions.

These days many flight schools or independent instructors have websites that provide much of the information you will want when conducting an initial screening of schools for cost, ease of scheduling, and compatibility with the kind of flying for which you want

to train. Then contact your prospects for more information, schedule a visit as a prospective student, or just walk in to make an inquiry and look around.

Not sure about your aviation goal yet? No worries. The people you meet at the flight schools you visit may be able to help you decide. Many student pilots are content to figure it out as they go; perhaps they always dreamed of learning to fly, and for the moment fulfilling that long-term goal is the only clear motivator.

The flight school staff can help you match up your flying goals with the most suitable training programs and pilot certification levels. For example, earning a National Pilot License (NPL) requires less total training than a Private Pilot License (PPL), but offers fewer piloting privileges and prohibits flight in some types of airspace. Earning a PPL requires more total training, but allows you to fly bigger, more powerful aircraft and is a leg up on higher levels of certification and training. Obtaining a medical certificate issued by a Designated Aviation Medical Examiner is required to exercise a PPL.

Whichever path you choose, a practical test comes at the end of flight training, based on your meeting experience and knowledge requirements you will find in the appropriate study publications and attested to by your instructor. You can review these requirements in the South African Civil Aviation Regulations.

Your schedule and learning style are important factors to consider. Home-study ground school guided by your instructor is a popular option and there are several on-line providers that allow you to progress at your own pace. If a classroom setting works best for you, it's important to know if the school provides ground school classes as well as flight training. If not, some educational institutions offer in-person adult-education pilot ground school that can prepare you for the knowledge test for the pilot certificate you seek.

On your visit, a flight school representative should be able to explain the organization's offerings and how they would work for you. Perhaps you can meet the instructor with whom you would fly and study. A short introductory flight could be part of your visit and could help you make some decisions.

Other matters your flight-school research should cover include:

- The school's pilot training curriculum, record-keeping, and flight operations procedures.
- Credentials of the school's instructional staff, student/instructor ratio; and rate of instructor turnover. (Can you count on having one instructor for your entire program, or be able to switch if not satisfied?)
- Ask whether the instructors are full-time employees or part-timers—it's mostly a matter of availability you are probing—and whether they have other pilot duties with the organization that takes them away from instructing.
- The safety record.
- The type of airport where training is based (control tower airport or nontowered airport) and whether other types are available nearby (beneficial for variety in training).
- How student progress is monitored, for example with periodic flight checks (so-called phase checks) by a chief instructor or other supervisory individual.

- Insurance coverage details.
- Ask if there are graduates of the school's training you could contact for feedback on their experience.
- Ask what a typical lesson looks like. While there are always exceptions each lesson should contain these elements:
 - A thorough pre-flight briefing that covers the objectives of the lesson and how satisfactory performance should look.
 - The actual flight itself.
 - A thorough post-flight debrief that provides a clear, detailed evaluation of your performance (what was good, what needs improvement, etc.), what you can expect for the next lesson, and any reading or video-watching assignments from you instructor in preparation for the next lesson.
- Flight instructors and flight schools are held to a very high standard by the SACAA. The vast majority are honest, ethical and provide quality flight training. Once you start training, however, you should watch for red flags such as (but not limited to):
 - Instructors who appear rushed, detached, or pre-occupied when you are together,
 - Instructors who are always hurrying to the next student,
 - Instructors who leave you with questions that were inadequately addressed,
 - Instructors/schools that do not work from a syllabus.

Instructors

The flight school you choose should have **well-trained instructors with experience**. It's usually OK to have instructors with less experience for the initial part of the training. But look for experienced instructors for the key phases of your training, such as instrument rating or MCC. It's usually better to have airline pilots (or former pilots) to train this.

The school should have the **number of instructors to cover the training requirements**. Instructor to student ratio should be 1 instructor per 4 – 5 students.

Instructors should spend **sufficient time with the students**. This means not only training flight, but also briefing and de-briefing.

School policy

It's also important to know **what happens if you quit your training**. Some schools demand that you pay all the training in advance or in a few instalments. If, for example, you cancel your training for medical reasons, be sure you get your money back.

Money talks...

It's no secret that flight training is expensive. There are generally no free-ride scholarships, no matter how passionate, committed, and talented you are. But there are multiple options when it comes to types of flight training and how you can pay for it.

Your choice of integrated or modular flight training will determine some of your costs, and how and when you pay for your training. Typically, an integrated program will be more expensive, as it often includes the diploma or degree courses, in addition to the flight training component of the program. With integrated programs, you'll also be required to pay for a full semester or full year at the outset.

A modular training program, which offers ground school and flight training only, will be more cost effective when you look at the bottom line. This works out great if you already have post-secondary credentials, or if you are looking at an aviation career where a high school education and your flight training will be sufficient. Generally, with modular training, it will be a pay as you go set up. You will likely make an initial investment to cover ground school course costs, and materials. And then when you have a lesson with your instructor, you will pay for that lesson. A payment scheme of this nature allows you the flexibility to start training now, without having thousands of dollars already in the bank. You can work your way through your training.

When comparing costs, make sure you get the whole story from any prospective flight training school on your short list. Some schools will base their student cost estimates on the absolute minimum number of flight hours and won't include any extra ground instruction or other fees that are sure to come up. One thing you can do is ask about a school's average flight training and instruction hours. That will give you a better idea of what the actual costs are going to be.

Most flight training schools will also have a limited number of line crew or dispatch positions available to their students. Not only will this help pay for your training, but it is an excellent way to meet other pilots and get your first aviation job listed on your resume!

List of questions to ask when you visit a flight school:

Cost

- What is the cost of the complete flight training?
- What is included in the cost and what is not included? (VAT, landing fees, navigation fees, instructor cost, fuel surcharges, exams, training materials)
- How is the training paid? Is it paid all in advance, in instalments, pay as you go...?

Instructors

- How many instructors do you have?

- What is the instructor-to-student ratio?
- What is their background?
- How long is usually spent on briefing and de-briefing?

School policy

- What is the training cancellation policy?

Whatever direction you choose, remember that the relationship you build with the school is a two-way street; you have rights as a customer, but you also need to fulfil their requirements as a participant in their training. If you understand what is being asked of you, and you deliver on those expectations, you should reap the benefits of their expertise. You also deserve to be treated with respect—and give that respect in return—or reconsider the relationship.