TAHOE
FLIGHT ACADEMY



THE STUDENT PILOT GUIDEBOOK

YOUR COMPLETE ROADMAP TO BECOMING A PILOT

FIRST STEPS | FUNDING & PLANNING | PRO TIPS | CHECK RIDE PREP



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Learning to fly is one of the most incredible and rewarding things you can do in life, but also one of the most challenging. There is so much to learn and so many unknowns. Go searching for information on the internet and, at best, you'll end up with information overload. At worst, you'll find outdated or misleading advice that makes the process harder than it needs to be.

My journey to becoming a CFI has been anything but standard. In the beginning, I never planned to chase professional aviation and spent over 7 years flying recreationally. At 30, I decided to make a career change and chase my dream, all while supporting a young family.

I'm living proof that you don't have to follow the traditional flight training model, and you're certainly not too old to make your dream a reality. I'm also a firm believer that seniority isn't everything. We shouldn't sacrifice our financial well-being and quality of life solely in pursuit of getting to the airlines (or whatever your goal is) as fast as possible.

That's exactly why I created this guide: to give you a clear, structured path through each step of training and help you approach your journey with confidence, purpose, and financial awareness.

STEP 1: TAKE A DISCOVERY FLIGHT

If you've flown in the pilot's seat of an airplane before, great! If you've only dreamed about it, I suggest taking a discovery flight at a local flight school first. Why? Because you honestly have no idea whether or not you actually like taking the controls and being responsible for flying the plane. It's not for everyone, and that's okay, so it's best to find out if you love or hate it before expending time, energy, and money on flight training.

WHAT'S A DISCOVERY FLIGHT?

A roughly 1 hour flight in a training airplane (often a Cessna 172 or Piper Cherokee) that gives you an opportunity to see what flying a plane is all about. You'll get the chance to take the controls for a short time, affording you a small glimpse of what being a pilot is like.

HOW TO BOOK?

Google flight schools in your area, pick one of the top search results, and give them a call to schedule. **Remember, you do not have to train with the school you take a discovery flight with!** We'll cover how to select the right school later on.

COME FLY WITH ME!

If you live in the Reno, NV area and would like to take your discovery flight with me, send me a DM on Instagram, or email me at cole@tahoeflightacademy.com



STEP 2: OBTAIN A MEDICAL

Once you've made the decision to become a pilot, the next step is ensuring you are medically qualified. Otherwise, you might be throwing money towards a goal you'll never be allowed to achieve.

DO THIS PRIOR TO TAKING ANY FLIGHT LESSONS!

WHAT TO GET

FIRST CLASS FOR PRO PILOTS

If your goal is to make flying a career, you'll likely need a First Class medical for those jobs. I highly recommend obtaining this on your first attempt. If there's any reason you wouldn't qualify for a First Class medical certificate, you'll want to know that now.

JUST PLANNING TO FLY FOR FUN?

You'll need to obtain at least a Third Class medical certificate.

HOW TO DO IT

1. FIND AN EXAMINER

You can only obtain an FAA medical certificate from an authorized Airmen Medical Examiner (AME). You can find a list of AMEs in your area here.

2. COMPLETE THE APPLICATION

You must complete an application via the FAA MedXpress website prior to your appointment with your AME. Make sure you enter your full name **EXACTLY** as it appears on your government-issued photo ID. You can complete the application here.

WHAT CONDITIONS ARE DISQUALIFYING?

Certain medical conditions may disqualify you from obtaining an FAA medical certificate. You can find that info here.

If you apply for an FAA medical certificate and your application is denied, you have **30 days** to apply for a reconsideration in writing to the Federal Air Surgeon. Please know that the reconsideration process is lengthy and cumbersome, so don't expect to receive approval for months (if at all).

STEP 3: COMPLETE GROUND SCHOOL

FAR Part 61.105 requires you to learn and be knowledgeable in specific subject areas before you are given permission to take the written knowledge exam. There are a few different ways to accomplish that:

1 TAKE AN ONLINE GROUND SCHOOL COURSE

This is the preferred option. It's both a cost-effective and efficient way of learning all of the required knowledge. Cost is typically between $250 and $300, covers everything you need to know, and allows you to study at your own pace.

There are several popular courses to choose from, but my personal recommendation is **The Finer Points Ground School App.**

I have all my student use it and there are two main reasons. First, and most importantly, is that it is designed to help you actually learn and retain the information rather than simply memorize it. Passing a test is cool, but remember the goal is becoming a good, safe pilot. Second is that it also contains a flight section. This section includes videos from the flight deck that show you exactly what to expect for everything you'll do in the airplane. Those videos are invaluable.

2 TAKE AN IN-PERSON GROUND SCHOOL

Many flight schools and local colleges offer in-person ground school. You typically pay around $500 for the course and attend 2-3 two-hour sessions a week for about 8 weeks. If you learn best through live human interaction, this may be a good option.

3 SELF-STUDY

You're not required to take any sort of formal ground school. If you want to read and interpet the FAR/AIM and a mountain of books on your own, you're more than welcome to do that. However, it's not recommended and will require a CFI to assess your knowledge and give you written permission to take the knowledge exam.

Disclaimer: If you click the link above and purchase a subscription to The Finer Points Ground School App, I will receive a commission. This doesn't cost you anything extra and is simply an opportunity for me to earn additional revenue recommending a product I personally use and love. Thanks for the support!

STEP 4: TAKE THE KNOWLEDGE TEST

At some point in your training, you'll need to pass the FAA Private Pilot Airplane (PAR) Knowledge Exam. This is the written test required before your practical test (check ride), and it covers the foundational aeronautical knowledge every private pilot is expected to understand.

While you can take this exam later in training, I strongly recommend completing it early in flight training. In fact, many flight schools won't allow you to solo until you've passed the knowledge exam. Getting it out of the way allows you to focus more fully on flying, rather than juggling test prep alongside lessons.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE SCHEDULING

Before you can take the PAR exam, you'll need:

- A knowledge test endorsement from an authorized instructor or approved ground school.*
- A government-issued photo ID
- To be prepared. This is not a test you want to wing

*Most online ground schools provide the required endorsement once you complete their course and practice exams.

HOW TO SCHEDULE THE EXAM

All FAA knowledge exams are scheduled through PSI Testing Services.

Schedule your FAA knowledge exam here.

STUDENT PILOT CERTIFICATE

- REQUIRED TO SOLO
- NAME MUST MATCH EXACTLY WHAT'S PRINTED ON YOUR GOVERNMENT-ISSUED PHOTO ID
- COMPLETE THE APPLICATION HERE

Your CFI must sign your student pilot application as the recommending instructor, so you need to have that nailed down first. See the Choosing a Flight Instructor section later in this guide.

The FAA often experiences delays in processing applications, so I recommend completing your student pilot application as soon as possible. If not, your first solo flight could be delayed.

AVOID THIS ROADBLOCK

You may notice I've already mentioned that the name printed on both your medical certificate and student pilot certificate must match exactly how your name is printed on your government-issued photo ID. This also applies to your home address.

Why? Because FAA certificates do not include a photo, so the only way to verify the certificates in your posession actually belong to you is by matching them to your photo ID.

Also remember this when you complete your application for a private pilot certificate prior to your practical exam. If the names and address don't match perfectly, you will not be allowed to take the test.

HOW TO FUND YOUR TRAINING

There's no way around it... Aviation is expensive and flight training is no different. You either need to make some serious sacrifices, have sufficient personal/family wealth, a little creativity, or a combination of all three to make your dream a reality.

Fun fact: I sold a motorcycle to pay for my private pilot training back in 2016.

Because of this high barrier to entry, many people turn to loans as their saving grace. I want to be very clear: **I am vehemently against taking out loans for flight training.**

If you want it bad enough, there are many ways to pay for flight training without going into debt. Loans should be an absolute last resort.

TOP OPTIONS

AVIATION START

There are thousands of scholarships available nationwide that can help pay for some or all of your flight training. Many student pilots aren't even aware they exist, so Aviation Start was created as an easy way to help aggregate everything in one database.

It's completely free and you'd be crazy not to check it out. Even though this database is very comprehensive, there may be local aviation scholarships Aviation Start isn't aware of yet. So, be sure to ask around your local airport to see if any additional opportunities exist.

- Primarily for U.S. citizens
- Over **$30M** in annual scholarship funding available
- Join here for free. Complete a questionnaire to see what you qualify for

JOIN THE MILITARY

Now, this option certainly isn't for everyone, but if you'd like to serve your country and have them pay for flight training in return, it's a viable one.

You should be aware that this path involves a longer journey towards your goal. Whether you choose to enlist or become an officer, you'll need to "do your time" before you can take advantage of these benefits.

There is a lot of information to cover with the military option, so be sure to subscribe to my YouTube channel so you can watch the video when it's released!

SAVE UP THE MONEY

Please, do not start flight training unless you have the money saved up first. If you try to pay as you go, you'll likely be unable to afford more than one lesson per week. The less frequently you fly, the more time and money you're going to spend.

I know people who have worked 3 jobs just to put themselves through flight training. Yes, it requires dedication, and no, it's not easy, but you'll stay out of debt and future you will be grateful you did.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

There are many different ways to pay for flight training and I'm certain I haven't covered them all. So get creative, you might surprise yourself!

BUT PLEASE, DON'T GO INTO DEBT TO PAY FOR FLIGHT TRAINING!

CHOOSING A FLIGHT SCHOOL

Should you train Part 61 or Part 141? Let's take a look at each.

PART 61

PROS

- **Flexible training pace:** Lessons can be tailored to your schedule, learning style, and proficiency level.
- **Instructor adaptability:** Training can be adjusted based on real-world conditions instead of strictly following a fixed syllabus.
- **Often lower overall cost:** You're not paying to complete unnecessary stages once you're proficient.
- **Real-world experience opportunities:** Greater freedom to train at different airports, environments, and scenarios.
- **Ideal for non-career pilots:** Works well for students flying recreationally or balancing training with work and family.

CONS

- **Less standardization:** Quality varies more depending on the instructor and school.
- **Requires self-discipline:** Students must stay organized and motivated without a rigid program structure.
- **Potential for inconsistent progress:** Without a strong syllabus, training can become inefficient if poorly managed.
- **Higher hour minimums:** FAA minimums are higher compared to Part 141 programs.

PART 141

PROS

- **Structured curriculum:** FAA-approved syllabi provide a clear, step-by-step training path.
- **Reduced minimum flight hours:** Lower hour requirements for certain certificates and ratings.
- **Consistent training environment:** Standardized instruction can help some students learn more efficiently.
- **Career-focused atmosphere:** Often designed for students pursuing airline or professional pilot pathways.
- **Access to financing or GI Bill benefits:** Many structured academies qualify for funding options unavailable under Part 61.

CONS

- **Less flexibility:** Training must follow the approved syllabus, even if a student progresses faster or learns differently.
- **Can be more expensive:** Completing every stage of the program may add time and cost despite lower hour minimums.
- **Limited training variety:** Operations are often confined to specific aircraft, airports, and procedures.
- **Pressure to stay on pace:** The structured environment may not suit students who need a slower or more customized approach.
- **Risk of "assembly line" training:** Standardization can sometimes prioritize completion over deep understanding or real-world experience.

There isn't a universally "better" path, only the one that best fits your goals, learning style, and schedule. Choose the environment that helps you grow, stay consistent, and build real confidence in the airplane.

CHOOSING A FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

The instructor you choose will shape your training experience more than anything else. More than the airplane, the school, or whether you train Part 61 or Part 141. Some students thrive in a structured flight school, while others do better with an independent CFI. Neither path is automatically better, but they offer very different experiences.

FLIGHT SCHOOL INSTRUCTORS

Training through a flight school is often the easiest way to get started. Airplanes, scheduling, maintenance, and a structured syllabus are already in place, which removes a lot of logistical stress for new students. Standardization can also create consistency, especially for those who prefer a clear, step-by-step path.

The downside is that larger schools sometimes feel impersonal. Instructors may be balancing heavy schedules or working toward airline careers, which can lead to higher turnover. That doesn't necessarily mean the instruction is poor, but students should be proactive about finding the right fit and speaking up if something isn't working.

INDEPENDENT INSTRUCTORS

Independent CFIs typically offer more flexibility and a highly personalized training approach. Lessons can be tailored to your strengths, weaknesses, and long-term goals, often creating a stronger mentorship dynamic. Many independent instructors also operate in a wider variety of aircraft and environments, exposing students to more real-world flying.

However, independence comes with more responsibility for the student. You may need to coordinate aircraft access through a flying club or rental network, and the structure of training depends heavily on the instructor's organization and professionalism.

SO... WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

There are excellent and terrible instructors in both environments. The real question isn't *where* someone teaches, but *how* they teach.

Look for an instructor who:

- Understands your goals
- Displays a genuine care for you and your success
- Has a clear, structured plan
- Focuses on skill mastery, not just minimum standards

A great instructor doesn't just prepare you for a check ride—**they empower you to become a confident, capable, and professional aviator.**

Remember: You always have options. If your training doesn't feel right, it's okay to explore a different instructor or environment.

TRAIN WITH ME!

I have access to over nine identical Cessna 172s in Reno, NV, making it easy to schedule and fly with me to earn your private pilot certificate.

If you own an airplane or plan to buy one for training instead of renting, I have experience in over 30 different aircraft types, so I am well-positioned to meet your needs.

Fill out this form to get the process started.

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING TRAINING

As I mentioned above, a good instructor needs to have a clear, structured process of taking you from zero time to private pilot. That plan can take on many forms, but I'm a firm believer than it must be written down and shared with the student. Otherwise, how will you know what to expect during training or how you're progressing? The simple answer: you won't.

Every CFI has their own ideology on how to train new pilots, but it should generally fall into these stages:

Basic Aircraft Control: Learn the fundamental skills required to fly the airplane during basic maneuvers like taxi, takeoff, climbs, turns, level flight, and descents.

Ground Reference Maneuvers: Continue to develop and refine the skills necessary to fly the airplane safely and prepare for learning how to land.

Normal Landings: Everyone's favorite part, learning how to land the airplane!

Performance Takeoffs and Landings: Learning the procedures and skills necessary to takeoff and land in crosswinds and from short and unpaved runways

Solo: Gain confidence flying the airplane by yourself. You'll be on a short leash to start with and gradually be given opportunity for larger challenges. On second thought, this is actually everyone's favorite part.

Cross Country Operations: Learn how to fly to different airports over large distances safely and accurately.

Night Flight: Learn how to fly safely at night.

Checkride Prep: Refine everything you've learned so you're ready to pass the test!

PROVEN WAYS TO SAVE MONEY

FLIGHT SIMULATORS

A simple home flight simulator on your desktop computer goes a long way toward improving your skills and saving money. No, it's not the same as flying the real airplane, but it's an excellent place to practice the procedural part of flying.
Note: Make sure to work with your CFI first so you don't develop any bad habits.

You don't need anything fancy, either. A desktop PC or Mac capable of running Microsoft Flight Simulator or X-Plane and a yoke/pedals are all you need. This is the yoke and pedals I use. You can usually find great deals on used ones on FB marketplace.

HOME STUDY

Follow the 3-to-1 rule.

You should be spending around 3 hours at home studying for every 1 hour of flight training. Showing up prepared for every lesson will save you money. It's also not just about bookwork, be sure to take the time to chair fly maneuvers between lessons. This builds critical muscle memory in the cockpit.

FLY MORE, SAVE MORE

If you want to complete in the shortest time frame possible and spend the least amount of money, try to commit to 3 lessons per week. 2 at a minimum. The less frequently you fly, the more time you'll spend relearning previous items during future lessons.

And don't fly every day, time for reflection and self-study are crucial. Aim to separate each lesson by at least a day.

REQUIRED RESOURCES

There are several important resources you should have on hand to be successful in your journey towards becoming a private pilot. Most of them are available for free through the FAA, but a couple must be purchased.

FAR/AIM BOOK

This physical book combines all the applicable Federal Aviation Regulations (FARs) and the Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM). You will need to memorize some of the information contained and know where to find everything else.

You have two options for the book... Buy one that is pre-tabbed and makes finding things easy. Or buy the standard version and tab it yourself. If you go with the self-tabbing method, it's possible you will memorize more of the information, but I personally find that unnecessary. Yes, some things must be memorized, but I just want you to know where to find everything else.

You can get the current year version of each on Amazon.

PILOT'S HANDBOOK OF AERONAUTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Covers all the basic knowledge you need to know to become a private pilot. Your ground school course will reference this document often.

Download for free here.

AIRPLANE FLYING HANDBOOK

A detailed explanation of how to fly an airplane. It covers every phase of flight and maneuver you will learn during training.

Download for free here.

PRIVATE PILOT AIRMAN CERTIFICATION STANDARDS (ACS)

The standards contained in this document are what you will be tested on during your check ride. You should become thoroughly familiar with all contained information and completion standards.

Download for free here.

OTHER IMPORTANT EQUIPMENT

IPAD MINI AND AN EFB SUBSCRIPTION

An iPad is essential in the cockpit. You will use it to run an Electronic Flight Bag (EFB) app that contains all the aeronautical charts and info you'll need. Make sure you go with an iPad Mini—the full size version is too large to be practical in the cockpit.

I also recommend using a yoke mount to hold your iPad during flight. This allows information to be readily available right in front of you, keeps the iPad from sliding around the cockpit, and encourages you to keep your head up and eyes outside the airplane. It will help immensely.

You will also have two primary options for EFB apps: ForeFlight and Garmin Pilot. ForeFlight holds the majority share of the market and has more features, but is significantly more expensive than Garmin Pilot.

Both apps currently work great, so choose whichever feels right for you. If you choose ForeFlight, I recommend the Premium subscription.

ANR HEADSET

Whether you plan to fly professionally or recreationally, investing in a high-quality, Active Noise Reduction (ANR) headset is worth every penny. It saves your hearing, makes deciphering radio calls easier, and keeps you from getting headaches.

Trust me, spend the money up front for a nice headset. If you cheap out, you'll end up spending more money when you get frustrated and upgrade in the future.

There's really only two worthwhile options in this space: **Lightspeed or Bose**.

I personally own a Lightspeed Zulu 3 and love it. It's lightweight, durable, and I can wear it comfortably for hours. Lightspeed also released a new version in 2025, the Zulu 4. Lightspeeds also have a braided chord that never tangles (this is possibly my favorite feature).

The only better headset on the market is the Bose A30 - and that is only due to the comfort factor. I start to get a headache after wearing my Lightspeeds for about 5 hours, but can go well over 8 hours with the Bose A30's. The Bose, however, costs over $300 more, so there definitely comes a point of diminishing returns.

I know the idea of a $150 headset sounds great in theory, but you'll spend thousands of hours together, so headsets aren't the place to skimp.

PREPPING FOR THE CHECKRIDE

STEP ONE: HOME STUDY

After completing ground school, chances are you haven't spent much time refreshing your memory on all the knowledge you must have heading into your checkride. If you want to be prepared for the big day, you'll need focus some serious energy on self-study outside of sessions with your instructor.

And this isn't only about memorizing all the answers, it's about taking it to the next level and developing the ability to come up with the right answer when presented with a situation. This is exactly what a DPE will do on the checkride and what you'll have to do in the real world to make good decisions and stay safe.

It's painful to review every single FAA resource as you try to refresh your knowledge, so I created a study aid to help you out: The Private Pilot Oral Exam Playbook.

If things go well, the oral exam portion of most private pilot checkrides takes around 90 minutes. You'll be asked about every subject area in the ACS, but you have no idea what questions will be asked or how the DPE will ask them.

That's the gap you need to bridge and what the playbook is designed to do. It's so exhaustive that if a DPE asked every question from the playbook, it would probably take them at least 6 hours to do so.

Is that overpreparing? Absolutely, but that's what you want. It results in confidence and being ready for anything the DPE might throw at you.

PREPPING FOR THE CHECKRIDE

STEP TWO: MOCK ORAL EXAM

I'm going to keep beating a dead horse here, but you can never be too prepared. Regardless of how much self-study you've done, doing a mock oral is a must.

Why? Because nothing else can truly simulate the stress and anxiety you'll feel during the actual checkride. How you interpret a DPEs questions, how you articulate answers, and how long it takes you to come up with those answers all have a significant impact on how the checkride is going to go.

Think of it like interviewing for your dream job. Are you going to simulate the environment and practice being asked questions and providing answers to a real human? If you want the job, you bet you are!

The best mock orals are way more difficult than the real thing, so if you can pass the mock, the checkride will be a breeze. I like to think I'm pretty good at this (and my track record agrees), so send me an email at cole@tahoeflightacademy.com when you're ready to start prepping for your checkride to schedule a mock oral.

STEP THREE: MOCK FLIGHT

Same thing as the mock oral, but in the airplane. Being evaluated is much different than the flight lessons you've done thus far, so doing a mock for the flight portion of your checkride is also a must.

To get the most out of it, I recommend using someone other than your primary instructor for this. They will have a different, impartial perspective and will be able to offer useful feedback.

THE PAYOFF



BECOMING A PRIVATE PILOT!

I'm here cheering you on and standing by to help you with anything you need on your path to becoming a private pilot.

If you have questions on literally anything about learning to fly, please do not hesitate to reach out. You can DM me on Instagram or email cole@tahoeflightacademy.com.

I look forward to sharing the skies with you soon!