

Private Pilot in 40 Hours -- It Can Be Done!

The FAA says you can get your first pilot's license in only 40 hours. The FAA also says almost nobody does it that fast. Whether you want bragging rights or you just need to keep costs down, it is possible to get the flight time close to 40 hours, as long as you have a plan and the willingness to do a lot of preparation on the ground.

By [Mark Ewell](#)



When I sat down with the Designated Pilot Examiner and handed him my logbook, it was pretty light: only three pages of entries, totaling 42.3 hours; just barely above the minimum. Of those 42 hours, 15.5 were PIC/solo, 5.3 solo cross-country, 3.0 dual simulated instrument, and 3.8 dual night. I expected the Examiner to comment on my minimal time -- maybe even hold me to a higher standard to ensure I was a safe pilot -- but we simply completed the oral, flew the flight test, and shook hands. After the two-hour flight test, I was a Private Pilot, with only 44.3 hours, and the legal ability to fly wherever and whenever I wanted.

If you're looking into becoming a pilot, you already know the party line: The FAA minimum requirement is 40 hours, but most people take more. The national average is 60 to 70 hours. There's a big difference between 60 hours and 40 hours. Why do most people take that long? How did I do it in 40 (OK, 42)? More importantly, how can *you* minimize the time it takes?

To answer the question of "how," you must begin by answering the question of "why." For me, the answer was simply financial. I did not become a pilot to begin a new career, but to add a tool for my own use in my current career, which requires a lot of travel. I wanted to learn to fly so that I could fly myself instead of taking the airlines.

For those who are pursuing a flying career, every hour of the first 250 is a requirement. If it takes 60, 70, even 80 hours to earn the private ticket, so what? It's all on the road to that 250-hour commercial checkride. There's no necessity in doing it in fewer hours, because the hours have to be flown and paid for anyway. In my case, however, every hour was coming out of my own pocket, in contrast to the flights I hoped to soon take on business, for which the company would reimburse my expenses. I wanted to do it cheap, and I wanted to do it fast.

As a secondary motivation, I wanted to earn my certificate prior to the centennial of flight, on December 17, 2003, and hopefully before Thanksgiving, so as to be able to take visiting family on rides that weekend. With all that in mind, I took my first flight on June 28, 2003, with a singular goal in mind: Private Pilot in as few hours as possible, as cheaply as possible. I achieved that goal, not only in terms of hours and time, but also in terms of cost. It was 21 weeks from first flight to checkride, 31 flights, and my total spending in becoming a pilot -- including 42.3 hours in a Cessna 172, 30.4 hours of ground and flight instruction, charts, headset and equipment, AOPA membership, and examiner fees -- came to \$5,026, right on budget.

For you to achieve a similar goal, you must also have the desire. It doesn't have to be financial, but it does have to be personal, and it does have to be meaningful. If you're pursuing a commercial certificate, maybe you just want to be able to say that you got your Private in 40. Maybe you want to be able to spend some of those time-building hours doing your own trips, on your own schedule, on your own route. Maybe you'd rather spend a few hours of post-private training getting a complex or tailwheel endorsement, and that will be your reward to yourself if you meet your goal.

Finally, the goal doesn't have to be 40. In fact, I started with a goal of sub-50, and only started shooting for 40 after I soloed so quickly (7.7 hours). Whatever the goal is, and whatever the reason behind it is, they both have to be meaningful, and important. Otherwise, none of these suggestions will be of much use.

To become a Private Pilot in as few hours as possible, a lot of things have to go right. Fortunately, most of them are within your control. Most of the following factors are interrelated -- each one helps one or more of the others. Get as many of them going your way as you can, and recognize which ones aren't going your way so you can minimize their impact.

Flight School and Instructor Choice

Your first and most important decision will be to select a flight school, and the next decision will be to select an instructor. When selecting a flight school, the most important factors to consider are the airport, the aircraft, and the instructors.

Airport

Ideally, your flight school will be based at an airport with a runway at least 4000 feet long and 75 feet wide, preferably with a full-length taxiway. 5000' x 100' is even better. These factors allow you to learn to land the plane in a forgiving environment. Once you learn to simply put the plane back on the ground, you can work up to those perfect touchdowns, straight down the centerline at the spot of your choice.

In contrast, a short and/or narrow runway at the home field will increase the amount of time required to be able to confidently land the plane, and therefore increase the amount of time to solo. Having to back-taxi down the runway, instead of on a taxiway, increases the risk you'll have to wait for someone else. Waiting burns hours.

As for a towered or non-towered field, there are benefits to a towered field, but not enough to make it a major decision criterion. Learning to fly at a towered field will ensure you're comfortable working with ATC very early in your training, and will also help you in the solo flight phase of your training, ensuring that you're adequately separated from other aircraft. At a non-towered field, there are a variety of communication methods and traffic patterns in place, including the "I don't use the radio and I'm landing ahead of you no matter what" method, which is a hazard to any pilot anywhere, but especially to a student solo pilot at an uncontrolled field.

Finally, all other things being equal, the airport should be as close and convenient to you as possible. If you're lucky enough to have your choice of airports that meet the criteria above, this is an obvious tiebreaker.

Aircraft

The flight school you select should have multiple, similarly equipped aircraft. This will help to ensure that an aircraft is available when you are. The fewer aircraft, the more likely you'll be sitting at home on a day you could be flying. Choosing a flight school with just one or two aircraft could make scheduling difficult -- especially when it's time for that oil change, regular inspection, or unforeseen maintenance problem. You'll miss enough scheduled flights for other reasons -- primarily weather -- and it's frustrating enough. It's even more frustrating to not be able to schedule a lesson because there is no aircraft available for the only time that weekend you can get away.



It should go without saying that the aircraft should be in the standard class of primary trainers: probably a Cessna 152 or 172, or a Piper 140 or Warrior. If cost is one of your driving factors, and all other things being equal, 152 or 140 time is going to be less expensive than 172 or Warrior time, but your cross-countries might be a little slower. You also want to do most, if not all, of your training in the same model (if your flight school has a choice). As you get closer to your checkride, determine which aircraft you're going to take to the checkride, and put as many of your hours in that particular one as you can.

Instructors

The number-one factor in your success as a pilot is your decision in hiring your instructors. Volumes have been written on choosing an instructor (including [here](#) on AVweb), so I'll not belabor the point, except to note that it helps to have a flight school with multiple instructors to choose from. This will ensure that you'll be able to work with someone that fits you personally.

Additionally, like aircraft, instructors sometimes aren't available when you want them. They get sick, they get new jobs, and they have other students who want them the same time you do. I'm not advocating round-robin flight instruction, but if you're a pre-solo student working on your landings, and your primary instructor gets the flu, someone else can take you around the patch and give you some pointers. You'll probably also benefit from hearing some things differently, and having a different eye applied to your technique. As another example, if you're going on a solo cross-country, any instructor on duty can probably review your flight plan and sign you off, with your primary instructor's consent, if that's how your schedule works best.

Don't be afraid to ask, from time to time, for a phase check, or a ride with another - typically more-experienced -- instructor. They'll check your progress, give you pointers, and serve as an important gauge of your ability level and deficiencies.

Study and Preparation

To maximize your time in the cockpit, you'll have to spend some time outside the cockpit. The more hours you spend working on your flying on the ground, the better you can use your time in the air. Pre-flight and post-flight ground instruction, home study, chair-flying, simulator time, and "aviation immersion" can all serve to improve the value of your flight lessons.

Pre-Flight and Post-Flight Ground Instruction

Your instructor should spend time with you before and after each lesson, on the ground, and they should charge you for it. If your instructor is only charging you when the Hobbs is running, get a new instructor. Either they are spending time in the airplane doing training that should be done on the ground, or they think so little of the value of their instruction that they don't charge you for the time on the ground. Neither of these is good for you.

Before each lesson, your instructor should explain to you what you'll be doing in that day's lesson. This could include a review of the practical test standards (PTS) for a maneuver (if applicable), an explanation of what is supposed to happen in the airplane and how to make it happen, and possibly some visual aids to help you understand the lesson. Your part is to pay attention, probably take notes, and ask questions. If you walk out to the airplane without completely understanding what you're going to be doing, you're going to spend more time learning to do it in the air.

After the lesson, you and your instructor should review the flight, and discuss what you'll do next time. This may be as simple as a brief chat on the way back to the office after tying down the plane, and that works, as long as your questions are answered, you know what you're trying to do to improve for next time, and you understand the objective for the next lesson.

Home Study

Outside of ground school, or video course, or self-study, or whatever you're doing to prepare for the written exam, you should study at home to prepare for each lesson. Since the instructor has told you what to expect, it's your job to be prepared. This has a dual impact: First, it gives you a book-knowledge base for the lesson -- which your instructor will augment -- and then you'll make practical in the airplane. Second, it demonstrates to your instructor that you're serious about the lesson and your desire to learn it, which has a circular effect in improving their desire to help you succeed.

The home study doesn't have to be onerous. From your books or other material, read about whatever you'll be doing in the next lesson, take a couple of notes, and maybe highlight the key sections. If there's a process to be followed, write down the steps. For some things, such as radio navigation, there are tutorials and information

on the internet as well. Use whatever resources are at your disposal, but at a minimum, read about what to do and how to do it. Even if you don't understand it, you'll have been exposed to the material, which will ease your instructor's job in explaining it to you.

Chair Flying

This is as simple as sounds, and 100% free, though it can make you feel a little silly. Sit in a chair, preferably in a locked, soundproof room, and talk yourself through a flight or maneuver. Say each step, what you're doing, what the plane is doing, what you're seeing, and what should be happening. Your eyes can be open or closed, whichever works best for you. Here's an example, for a crosswind takeoff:

I taxi onto the runway, using my feet to steer, and turn the yoke fully towards the wind. I'm on the runway centerline. I smoothly apply full power, keeping the ailerons into the wind and tracking the centerline with my feet. I check that the oil pressure is up and the airspeed indicator is alive. I look far down the runway and keep the plane straight with my feet. As speed increases, I feel the pressure on the yoke and I slowly decrease the pressure I'm holding on the ailerons. I've reached takeoff speed, and I pull back to lift the airplane off the ground, adding right rudder and dipping the wing slightly into the crosswind to maintain the runway heading ...

As you talk yourself through the process, try to see yourself performing the actions, and see the airplane responding to them. You'll be amazed how this one simple exercise can dramatically decrease the amount of time it takes to learn a maneuver, especially landings when you are pre-solo.

Flight Simulator

If you have a flight simulator program, use it. You do not have to spend \$200 on a flight yoke and pedals, though they definitely help. If you don't buy a yoke, at least use a joystick. The cost of one flight hour of instruction will buy you a copy of the software and a joystick. It doesn't even have to be the latest and greatest: Microsoft Flight Simulator 2000 or 2002 fits the bill, and the payback will definitely exceed the cost.

One key is to fly in an aircraft similar to the one you use in real life, and practice the procedures you'd use. The other key is to use the sim for things that it can simulate in a way that helps you. For example, steep turns in the sim would be a waste of time, as steep turns are all about feel (such as your weight in the seat as you pull back and add power, how the horizon looks against the nose in the proper angle, etc.), but sim-flying the traffic pattern when you're pre-solo can work wonders.

Radio navigation and lost procedures are also a cinch to practice in the sim. Get out your real chart, open the software's map window that allows you to click-and-drag



the plane to a new location, move the plane to a new location, and go back to the flight and try to figure out where you are. This exercise is even more fun with a friend or family member hiding the plane for you, and timing your recovery. Don't spend \$100+ per hour learning to tune and navigate by VOR; do it on the ground in the sim.

Be careful with the simulator, though. You can learn bad habits that will have to be untrained, such as an excessive focus on instruments instead of outside the airplane. The best simulator practice is after you've already gone over something with your instructor (e.g., traffic pattern and landings), or in conjunction with your home study (e.g. VOR navigation). This isn't a warning to be afraid of the sim but just to be cautious.

Aviation Immersion

In addition to your textbooks and manuals, take the time to read or expose yourself to anything aviation-related you can find. In addition to all the articles in the [Training](#) section on AVweb, read some of the other articles in areas of interest. [The System](#) and [Airmanship](#) could both be especially helpful, but all the articles help to immerse you in the world of aviation. Of course, a subscription to AVflash gives you a twice-weekly dose of flying news. Some of it will be gibberish as you're learning, but each time you read it, more of it will make sense. There are many other online resources as well.

Offline, consider a membership to the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association ([AOPA](#)) or the Experimental Aircraft Association ([EAA](#)). In addition to representing general aviation interests both in Washington and in your local area, they each have their own magazine, which bring aviation lore and literature to your doorstep every month. AOPA also has a great [Web site](#) with resources like downloadable/printable diagrams of airports, weather, and flight planning. Generally, anything you can do to tune your brain for flying will help you in your pursuit of the Private Pilot Certificate.

Other Hints

In addition to flight school selection and personal preparation, there are several other things you can do to improve the value of your instruction and reduce the amount of time it takes to earn your Private Pilot Certificate.

Fly Often

If you don't do anything else suggested in this article, this one item alone will reduce the amount of flight time, as well as the amount of calendar time, required to earn your Pilot Certificate. Simply put: the closer your flights are to each other, the less time available to forget what you've learned, and the less time required to spend in each lesson getting back to the point where you were at the end of the previous lesson. My recommendation is twice a week if you can do it, but once a week at a minimum. Some weeks (or weekends), you won't be able to fly, due to scheduling and/or weather. However, if you plan for twice every week, you'll average out OK.

Solo Quickly

This may seem obvious -- of course you want to solo quickly! So, why? And how? To understand, review the table below, which illustrates a basic plan for earning your Private Pilot Certificate, showing minimal hours for each task.

Step	Hours	Task
1	5	pre-solo maneuvers, beginning work on landings
2	X	pre-solo work on traffic pattern and landings up to first solo
3	5	solo flight: landings by yourself, fly back and forth to nearby airport
4	5	short-field and soft-field landings; additional solo practice during the rest of your training
5	5	dual cross-country instruction
6	3	solo short cross-country (2-3 times)
7	3	night cross-country
8	3	simulated instrument
9	3	solo long cross-country
10	5	checkride prep

The total required for all 10 steps, ignoring step 2, is 37 hours. Step 2, pre-solo, is the x-factor. The number of hours it takes to get you to solo will be the single biggest determining factor in how many hours it takes you to finish your training. Post solo, this plan shows 32 hours being required. You can assume 30 to 40 hours for that, depending on how well your checkride prep goes, and assuming you're following the other suggestions. It's as simple as that. If it takes you 10 hours to solo, you're looking at 40-50 hours. If you go 20 hours before soloing, you're looking at 50-60 hours. There's no way around it: If it takes you 20 hours to solo, the odds of finishing in less than 50 hours are very low.

You want to solo quickly, but that's easier said than done, right? Well, yes. You'll solo when both you and your instructor agree that you can competently and safely fly and land the plane, no sooner. Having said that, there's still a lot you can control.

Obviously, preparing and practicing at home are the most important things you can do to speed your solo. However, the little things are even more important -- like getting your medical/student pilot certificate well in advance to ensure you have it when you need it.

Also, you'll take a pre-solo written exam. Ask to see it, or ask what the topics are, so you can study. Be prepared to take it, and ask to take it as soon as you can. This is an important part of getting all the pre-solo paperwork done, so that the only thing you have to do to solo is learn to land the airplane.

When you're getting closer to solo, ask your instructor to be quiet more often in the plane. Once you've done it several times, hearing your instructor say "too high," or reminding you to pull the carb heat, is not helpful. When the time comes, as your landings improve, ask your instructor to put his hands in his lap and his feet on the floor. Nothing unsteadies a pre-solo student quite like seeing the instructor reach for the controls on short final, and nothing diminishes the student's necessary feeling of self-determination by knowing that the instructor is waiting to correct any mistake.

Don't expect your instructor to go hands-off too early: If you're doing well on the approach, but need a little centerline alignment at the last minute, you don't want to

see the instructor's feet shooting out for the rudder pedals, you just want to feel a little movement under your feet as the correction is made and you do the rest. But if your instructor can't keep his hands and feet to himself, and his mouth shut, for an entire circuit around the pattern, then either you aren't ready to solo, or you need a new instructor.

Be mentally prepared to solo. Working on your chair-flying and simulator practice will help with this. One day, your instructor will turn to you and say, "I think you're ready to solo this airplane." When that time comes, you want to be ready.

Finally, don't let the "time to solo" stress you out. If you're doing your part -- studying at home, practicing in the chair and the sim, listening to your instructor, and asking all the questions you can think of -- then the solo will come, in its own time. Whether it's in five hours, or 25 hours, it will come when you can safely land the plane. Concentrate on that, not on the logbook.

Putting It All Together

Earning your Private Pilot Certificate is a significant accomplishment, no matter how many hours it takes you. If you don't have the desire to shoot for a 40- or 50-hour completion, hopefully some of these suggestions can still help you to reduce the hours it takes, and save you some time and money.

I was fortunate to come across some of these items by luck, and some by advance planning. They led me to solo in 7.7 hours, and earn my certificate in 42.3. I'm not a genius, and my instructors will confirm I'm no aviation natural. These suggestions just represent a simple, workable plan that you can use in whole or in part to shorten your own training. Good luck, and see you in the skies!

