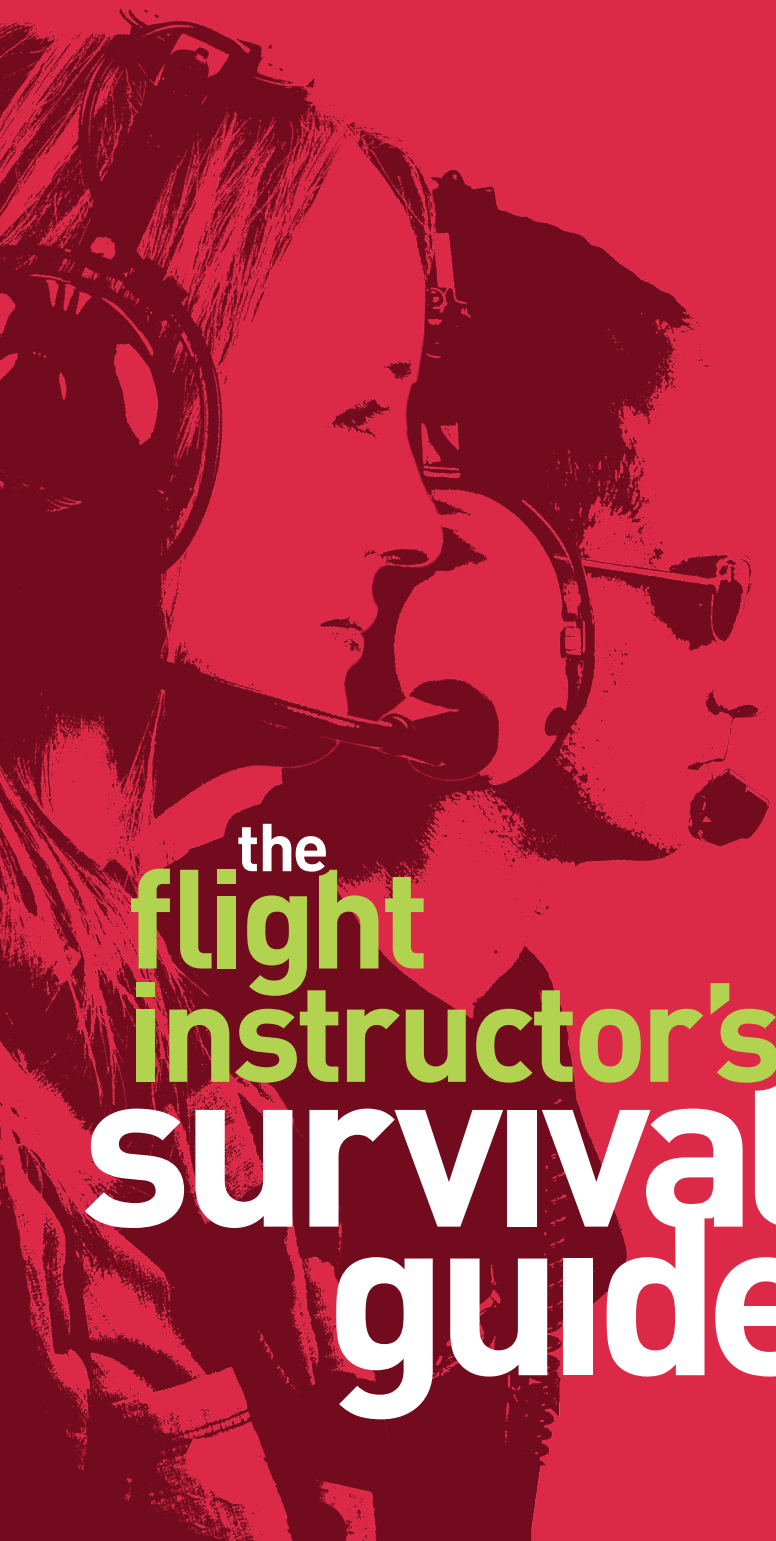

the flight instructor's survival guide

true, witty, insightful stories illustrating the fundamentals of instructing

Arlynn McMahon

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Aviation Supplies & Academics, Inc.
Newcastle, Washington

The Flight Instructor's Survival Guide: True, Witty, Insightful Stories Illustrating the Fundamentals of Instructing
by Arlynn McMahon

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disclaimer

The methods and opinions in this book are that of its author. Every training situation is different and the advice or strategies contained herein may not be suitable for you. You are advised to work with an experienced qualified certificated flight instructor.

foreword
by rod machado

An old Chinese aphorism suggests that it is better to spend three years looking for a good instructor than to spend even three minutes with a bad one. If you were lucky, the first flight instructor you found was a good one. If fortune smiled on you, however, and all relevant celestial bodies were properly aligned, you found Arlynn McMahon.

Four and a half decades in the aviation business have exposed me to many amazing flight instructors, and Arlynn is one of the best I've seen. She's highly skilled, capable, and competent, without question. Her signature contribution in the aviation community, however, is the rarest of all cockpit qualities. I'm speaking of *wisdom*—the wisdom that Arlynn brings to each flight training session. It's a quality that's fundamental to producing safe pilots, and it comes from her deep understanding of human nature.

The Flight Instructor's Survival Guide is more than a book about flight instructing. It's a book about human nature as it is reflected in the cockpit. Within its pages are forty-four powerful instructional stories about students of all levels who struggle to master the unknown—the environment, the airplane, but mostly their own human nature. Arlynn understands this struggle and skillfully applies her tradecraft to make the flight training experience a meaningful one.

Arlynn can do this because she's part psychologist, part philosopher, part mom, and even part lawman. She's adept and intellectually flexible enough to assume any and all identities as the flight training situation

demands. Wielding her training aids, writing board, and eraser with masterful intent, she effectively dismantles her student's anxiety, self-doubt, and confusion. In their place, she creates the opportunity for her students to learn something new. In the process, they become something new.

That's why *The Flight Instructor's Survival Guide* is an excellent book for flight instructors. It begins where the FAA's *Aviation Instructor's Handbook* ends. It presents practical advice—by way of concrete examples, no less—on ethics, character, and professional values. Arlynn shows us how to handle some of the most difficult and challenging dilemmas that all flight instructors face at one time or another. She demonstrates how to do this smartly, with grace, style, and wisdom. Any instructor or instructor applicant (or pilot, for that matter) worth his or her weight in slow-running Hobbs meters is advised to read this book—and to read it more than once.

In the 1970s, ten of the nation's top martial arts masters were asked the following question: *If you only had one hour to spend with a student, what technique would you teach that person?* In every instance, each martial arts master said that he wouldn't teach any technique; instead, he would discuss the philosophy of his art with that student.

While we might not be fortunate enough to fly with Arlynn and hear her philosophy of flight training firsthand, we can spend an hour (or several) with her by reading *The Flight Instructor's Survival Guide*. Do this, and you'll be spending time with a true master of aviation instruction.

Rod Machado
San Clemente, CA
March 21, 2016

acknowledgments

"I'm writing a book about my customers in flight training."

"Oh God, <gulp> am I in it?"

"Uh, should you be?"

"Yeah, do you remember that time when I.… Boy, that was a doozy. Someone could really learn from my mistake!"

That's the way they viewed it. When I called clients to tell them what I was doing, they each saw it as a badge of honor. They were happy to know that their story—sharing their experience—could perhaps lessen another pilot's pain.

I'd like to thank all the customers who have allowed me the honor of sharing their lives and cockpits through the years and especially those included in this book.

introduction

The FAA *Aviation Instructor's Handbook* (AIH, FAA-H-8083-9) is required reading and is the reference for the Fundamentals of Instructing (FOI) FAA Knowledge Exam—a required test for all ground and flight instructors. The AIH is not an aviation book but a text that details human behavior and communication; it's the basis for how flight instructors teach and how students learn. Psychology is a thick portion of many chapters.

Educational psychology, better known as the fundamentals of instructing, is a foreign subject to most pilots. Because the fundamentals appear to have little to do with flying, the aspiring instructor is not excited by the concepts. The inclination is to memorize clinical-sounding terminology and make up acronyms as memory joggers for passing the test. On top of that, recent revisions to the AIH have added more bulk to theoretical concepts, at the expense of any practical how-to. What is missing is someone who can show *how* fundamentals of instructing concepts fit into the job of a flight instructor.

In teaching ground schools for instructor applicants, I find it helpful to share with students my experiences with prior clients. These stories help to illustrate how the fundamentals of instructing have applied to my job of making safe pilots. Stories usually include a bit of commentary—something that goes beyond the text, but is relevant to the job of a flight instructor.

The Flight Instructor's Survival Guide is a collection of short stories that I tell while teaching ground school. They've been collected over a span of 30 years and 10,000 hours of dual given.

These narratives graphically emphasize important concepts from the AIH. The fundamentals of instructing apply to each of us, not as pilots or instructors, but as humans. There is a piece of each of us in these tales. You might find yourself relating to these students and their challenges—or to me, at times, a bewildered instructor.

Real clients and events inspired the stories in this book. Of course, I've told them from my memory and from the perspective of a flight instructor, and yes, I changed identifying details to maintain their anonymity.

I tell some of these stories from the perspective of a new instructor, while others reflect me as a chief instructor and school administrator. Sometimes the "student" is actually an instructor that I supervised or mentored.

This book is a necessary companion to the AIH for anyone desiring to develop aviation-citizens with character, professionalism, and ethical values.

Throughout the book, I have referred to generic students and customers as "he." It certainly doesn't leave out the feminine; it's just easier to read. In fact, you'll notice that a good many of my clients are female.

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stories about human behavior

Maslow doesn't get enough credit.

If trouble is brewing with a student, look first to Maslow to fix it. Maslow is with us every day—people have to eat several times and it's just as important to have other needs met numerous times each day. Chances are good that the student's problem is rooted in basic needs.

Let's assume you've just finished the flight portion of a lesson and now you're headed back to the classroom. Instead of rushing the student through the debrief, try something different. Say something like, "Take a quick break, get a drink and I'll meet you in the classroom when you're ready." After the client has returned, inquire, "Were there any aircraft discrepancies that we should write up?" And, if you should pass another student on the way to document the discrepancies, introduce everyone. Can you see how we're meeting basic needs?

Only after the student's first three levels of basic needs are met is he fully prepared to learn. But, don't stop there. Find opportunities to reassure him that you believe he has the right stuff. Give him a few small windmills to conquer and remind him that something very worthwhile is just over his horizon. Now you've pulled him up a little higher on his pyramid.

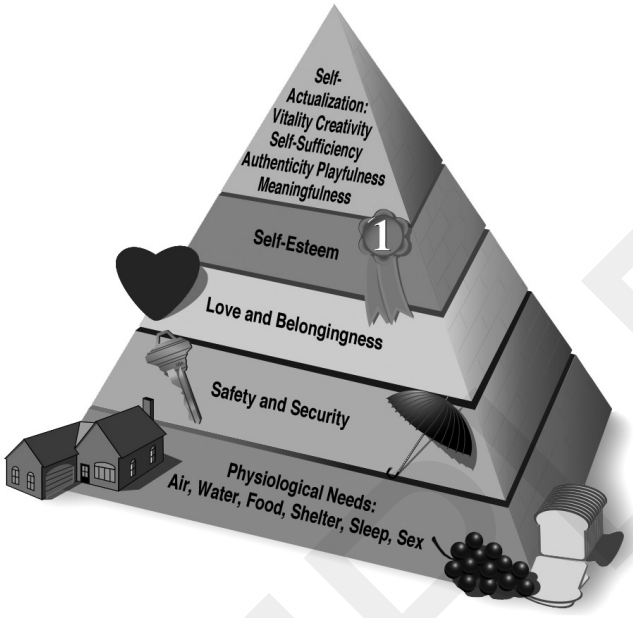

Figure 1-1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. (FAA)

In this chapter, you'll meet a few clients whose basic needs were obvious, a few that were not, and some whose needs I failed to meet.

Walter

At 40-something, he still possessed the chiseled body of an athlete who played hard. Everything about Walter's life was big. He had a prosperous private medical practice, a big beautiful family, and a big house, and hewas already talking about buying a big hanger for his first plane.

During our flight training, Walter completed every assignment effortlessly. I could have soloed him in eight hours—he was that good. Still, I waited until hour twelve, just because. He scored 100 percent on his Private Pilot Knowledge Exam and in that way, he was a challenging student.

It bothered me that I had never seen Walter make a mistake. He never bounced a landing. He never needed a go-around, never got lost or tongue-tied while speaking to ATC. He was always sure of himself.

I never had the opportunity to see him correct a mistake or handle a bad situation and it bothered me that I didn't have a clue about how he might react.

Then it happened.

It was the last leg of our dual cross-country. Everything was perfect. The VOR needle was straight up. Every ETA was recorded and each checkpoint accounted for. He had even pre-set the KLEX ATIS into the standby frequency on the #1 COM, just waiting for the miles to click away. I asked what *should* have been a simple question: "How many miles is it from our current position to Lexington?"

He confidently snapped the plastic plotter down on the sectional in his lap and pronounced, "102 miles." *Hummm*…that's not right, I thought to myself. And, so, there it was—the first and only Walter-mistake. It was the tiny mistake of reading a WAC scale against a sectional chart. Everyone's done it.

I wanted him to work through it. I wanted him to find his own mistake without me pointing at it. Alternately, I wanted him to consider suitable options based on his *perceived* information. "That doesn't sound right," I inquired, "how many miles is this entire leg?" After he incorrectly read the WAC mileage for the second time, I asked if that was the number that he recorded on the NavLog during our planning.

"No, it's not!" Deep furrows formed into his forehead, marking his confusion. I could almost hear his blood pressure rising. "Sixty miles are missing from my planning computations."

My goal was to get him thinking out ahead of our current position; I wanted his thinking to project ahead of the plane. "Well, how will the additional mileage affect our fuel supply in reaching Lexington?"

He expertly whizzed the manual E6B through a few rotations before the realization hit, "We don't have enough fuel! We can't make Lexington!" His eyes were large. He was horrified.

I pressed further, "OK, what are we going to do about it?"

"What are *we* going to do about it?" His voice increased in volume with the overemphasis on *we*. "*We* aren't going to do anything. *You* fix this," and with that, he defiantly removed his hand from the C152's controls and folded his arms across his chest. The plane, without autopilot, flew on trim and stability alone.

"You do realize," his tone now matter-of-fact, "this is all *your* fault. Yeah, you're the instructor. *You* looked over my planning. *You* were supposed to be checking my work. *You* should have caught this. I did a hundred calculations. I can't be expected to get every one perfect."

While I was considering how to respond, he continued, "This is not my fault. You kept pushing me '…update the weather, preflight the plane, come on, we gotta get out of here,'" his voice mocking mine. "You are the worst instructor ever. I don't know why I chose you. You should have fixed this before we even got in this plane."

My head was reeling; I was confused. Then suddenly he began thinking ahead—far, far ahead.

"Oh no! If I die today, my wife will have to raise five little boys all by herself. Oh geez, I don't have enough life insurance. She'll lose the house. Oh my God! The boys' college fund—I haven't even set that up yet." He was becoming hysterical.

I was shell-shocked. Maybe that's why it took longer than it should have to recognize his defense mechanisms. I remembered reading about them during flight instructor training. I just saw resignation when he crossed his arms. I recognized compensation, rationalization, projection, displacement and denial. OK, once I understood what was happening, it was time to get to work.

"Walter, please fly the plane."

"No!"

"We need to make a plan, let's work together. I'll fly. You have the chart; you navigate. Is there an airport nearby that we can divert to?"

Without modern avionics, he had only the sectional to assess our surroundings. "Yes, we should be able to make Danville," his voice now hopeful. He got to work plotting a heading and took the flight controls.

Once it appeared that we were safe, he calmed down some but he wasn't finished chastising me. He was patronizing through the entire 25 very long miles to Danville. My young 20-something years of age made me open to his fatherly-type reprimanding of my teaching technique. I didn't utter a word. He suggested several improvements to my supervision abilities. He offered 101 ways to improve the way I looked, the way I talked and even the way I wrote in his logbook. Nothing about me escaped his ridicule. I sat quietly and continued to watch the sky for traffic.

We must have had a horrific headwind for the eternity that passed while en route to Danville. By the time he was preparing for descent to traffic pattern altitude, I had had more than enough. "Ooo-kay, fly heading 030. Take me to Lexington." I added a pointing palm toward my new destination to emphasize the direction.

His face was perplexed. A suddenly confident, commanding voice suggested I knew something he didn't. "You made a mistake," I tried to sound unthreatening and reassuring, "We are fine. We have plenty of fuel to make Lexington. Just please, take me home." Surprisingly, he was quick to become calm and compliant.

The remainder of the flight was without a word. He managed every task perfectly including a flawless landing. Returned to the ramp, he retarded the mixture and exited the plane. He didn't tie her down. He didn't collect his flight bag. He hustled through the flight school office without saying goodbye to anyone. The wheels on the big Mercedes squealed as he departed the parking lot.

Bingo! Escaping his problem, Walter just scored 100 percent on defense mechanisms.

Left alone to secure the plane, I felt empty and sad about how the situation had turned. A wonderful cross-country on a beautiful day had somehow twisted to bad. I called my mentor, Charlie, for some advice and encouraging words. He was pretty clear that I handled Walter all wrong. I should have diffused him earlier. By allowing the situation to worsen, it ignited out of control. It's very likely that now Walter's ego was shattered and he would be too embarrassed to show his face around the airport.

At the time, with probably 100 hours of dual instruction, I had never before seen defense mechanisms—at least not like that. I was totally unprepared for how sudden they might come on or how explosive they could be. Somehow, I was under the assumption that a student would lean to a single one or the other for defense. No one ever told me that a student could fire all the defense mechanisms and all at once—simultaneously and sequentially. Trapped in the smallness of a cockpit, there is no cover for an unsuspecting instructor.

It was good that I had learned about defense mechanisms during instructor training. Once it dawned on me what was going on with Walter, it helped me to deflect his verbal attacks. Without this knowledge, when Walter started his assault, I might have been inclined to defend myself—and *my* defense mechanisms might have flared. Then we would have been two people focused on winning the fight rather than on piloting the plane. It was a big learning day for me.

After several heartfelt apologies and much groveling on my part, Walter eventually agreed to a truce but our relationship was never the same. He completed training and passed his Private Pilot Practical Exam

on the first attempt…of course. Unfortunately, I never saw him again after the final handshake and graduation photo. It wasn't my choice; I think he was uncomfortable with me having seen him like that.

…

As a side note, I hope you will consider working with a mentor. It's a huge comfort and an enormous confidence builder to be able to pick up the phone to ask a trusted confidant a quick question, a stupid question, or even an embarrassing one. A mentor can save you from making a mistake…or in my case, understand how not to make the same mistake twice.

Read more about these concepts in the *Aviation Instructor's Handbook:*

Human factors that inhibit learning

Defense mechanisms

Repression

Denial

Compensation

Projection

Rationalization

Reaction formation

Fantasy

Displacement

Ricky

Ricky was afraid of stalls. He would perspire just talking about them. When I say he was afraid, I mean that he would cancel any lesson where stalls appeared in the content. Ricky was a certificated flight instructor.

I am afraid of the dentist. It's not a logical fear; there's no reason for me to be afraid. My dentist is a longtime friend. On an intellectual level, I know he would never hurt me and that he has access to all the feel-good drugs for the invasive procedures. Nevertheless, fear is not always a logical thing.

Therefore, when a pilot says that he's afraid of stalls, steep turns, spins or anything else we have to complete during training, I am sympathetic. It may not be a logical fear, but a pilot's fear is very real to him, thus it will affect his performance and the quality of his training experience.

Ricky had completed flight training elsewhere and came to our school for his first flight instructor job. I first became aware of his distaste for stalls during our standardization training, but I didn't realize how bad it was until he started working with clients. Suddenly, it became common knowledge around the school that Ricky didn't like stalls and students should schedule with someone else for those lessons. As chief instructor, this was not acceptable to me.

Ricky's instructor had not been thoughtful in his introduction of stalls. From the way Ricky described his earliest stalls, they were robust.

the flight instructor's survival guide

Arlynn McMahon

After passing the FAA's Fundamentals of Instructing (FOI) knowledge test required of all instructors, the true challenge begins—applying that knowledge in the real world of teaching flight. Follow along as Arlynn McMahon lifts the FOI principles from the classroom and brings them into the cockpit. Her forty-four stories demonstrate the FOI principles in flight and offer practical strategies for dealing with both common and unexpected situations—all with wisdom, grace, and humor.

McMahon's companion to the *Aviation Instructor's Handbook* (FAA-H-8083-9) uses memorable parables and provides sage advice to illustrate FOI principles at work with real clients in real-life situations. Psychology, human factors, professionalism, effective communication, customer service, and ethics are evident in her teaching style with the people she's interacted with over decades in the business of flight training. McMahon's experiences illustrate what works—and why—for instructors and their students.

Through artful storytelling, McMahon shows how a successful instructor is sometimes a psychologist, other times a detective, and always a gatekeeper enforcing rules and cultivating the behaviors required to be a responsible aviation citizen. Delightful, full of wisdom—and written with humor, kindness, and dignity for her students—this is an invaluable guide for all flight and ground instructors who will benefit from using McMahon's insights with their own clients.

Foreword by Rod Machado

The key to successful instruction is to create meaning right where the student is at, and this book does that—communicating the "why" and "how" behind the FOI. A key [to scenario-based training and single-pilot resource management] is the adaptation of aviation "tribal knowledge" into usable and effective formats. Arlynn has… collected this tribal knowledge into a single and very usable document.

Dr. Frank Ayers, Chancellor
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

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