

Checkride Failures

Inexperienced instructors and DPE shortages

BY STEVE KROG



WHY ARE THERE SO many checkride failures today? National statistics show that nearly 50 percent of the initial private pilot checkrides end in failure. I've come to the conclusion there are several possible reasons.

Approximately a decade ago, the FAA enacted changes or new guidelines for conducting checkrides. Rather than having a student perform a maneuver such as a power-off stall, various scenarios were used comparable to real-life situations where a power-off stall may occur.

When I was first made aware of the scenario-based format, I didn't think highly of it. It seemed that it would add a lot more work and time spent teaching. I took some time to more thoroughly study the scenario-based format and decided then that it was going to be a true positive when teaching students to fly.

Using the power-off stall as an example, where is it most likely to occur? Coming out of a descent is one instance, and another is making turns while establishing the landing configuration in the traffic pattern.

The old method of teaching power-off stalls was to establish a safe altitude, make a clearing turn, apply carb heat, reduce the power, and then apply back-pressure until the stall occurs. Easy steps. Now mix into that equation the request for a descent and heading change, and then stalling the airplane while in the turn. The students become so busy they forget how to do a proper stall and recovery unless scenario training has been used.

There is another factor needing attention in this scenario as well. Many of today's young instructors have a fear of doing stalls. I've proven this statement numerous times when students come to us after beginning their flight training somewhere else. During an evaluation flight to determine what this student knows, or doesn't know, I'll ask for a stall with a full break, and then a recovery to level cruise flight. The student will look at me and admit having never done a full stall with a break. Rather, their instructor would have them recover as soon as they heard the stall warning indicator.

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That is not a stall. As the pilot's operating handbook for the aircraft being flown states, this is but a warning that a stall is about to occur if another 5-10 mph of airspeed is dissipated. The question I ask myself is how did the instructor working with this student ever get their instructor rating if they can't perform, or teach, full stalls?

If a pilot — student or otherwise — has not been properly taught to recognize and recover from a stall, how will they respond if they inadvertently enter a full stall? Without adequate training, fear takes over and common sense is no longer in the equation. Fear causes one to revert to doing inputs to the lowest common denominator. By that I mean, in a full stall with a break, a pilot under the influence of fear will pull back on the stick or yoke while moving the stick or yoke away from the dropped wing. Now the perfect stall-to-spin entry has been established via the controls, and the stall has become a spin.

Another maneuver that has been added to the private pilot checkride is performing a rapid descent of approximately 1,000 feet. Neither common sense nor good instruction has been applied here in many instances. The scenario I like to use is this. You are cruising at 4,500 feet, and you smell smoke in the cockpit. How will you handle this situation?

Common sense will tell you that you need to get this airplane on the ground as quickly and safely as possible. After challenging a student with this scenario, I often see a power

BOB LUSSOW, EAA LIFETIME 206907, and I had the pleasure of conducting two forums at AirVenture. I have discussed this with our flight standards district office, and they have agreed that if you attended either of these forums and want WINGS credit, email me your name and email address. I will pass it on for you to obtain credit. My email is sskrog@gmail.com.



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reduction to idle, and then lowering the nose to establish the best glide speed. Meanwhile the smoke is getting thicker. Incorrect inputs on all accounts.

This is something everyone should practice in the aircraft they fly. What is the best setup to reduce altitude rapidly without exceeding the red line speed of the aircraft? Generally, the best method is pushing the nose over and beginning a tight turn left or right. Doing so will give you more than a 1,000 fpm descent rate without exceeding the red line. If your airplane has flaps, try this maneuver with and without flaps. But don't exceed maximum flap extension speed. You might be surprised at what you find.

In the scenario I outlined above, while rapidly descending I want the student to give thought to where the smoke might be coming from. More often than not, it is something electrical. While making the rapid descent, turn the master switch OFF. Once the altitude has been lost, begin diagnosing where the smoke is coming from.

Again, this is or should be a commonsense action. After waiting a minute or two for the smoke and smell to dissipate, we can begin by first shutting down every electrical item and/or circuit in the airplane. Then turning the master switch to the ON position. If no smoke or smell is noted, begin turning on the electrical items based on most important to least important. For instance, I turn the radio on and wait for about 30 seconds. If no smoke or smell, then turn the transponder on and again wait for 30 seconds. Again, no smoke, then possibly the strobe lights and so on. Eventually you will find the source, such as the navigation lights. Turn them off and leave them off until safely on the ground.

A second rapid descent scenario I use is smoke and/or fire coming from the engine compartment. Asking this of a student while in flight often brings that deer in the headlights look. Common sense should tell you two things. First, get the airplane on the ground as fast as possible by using the rapid descent procedure. Then, establish a bank angle or even a slip away from the flame. Turn off the fuel. A rapid turning descent may well extinguish the flames or at least direct them away from the cockpit. Unfortunately, these scenarios are seldom taught to a student pilot.

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A designated pilot examiner (DPE) shared a situation with me that he had experienced. He asked the student to demonstrate a short-field takeoff. Rather than taxiing to the end of the runway, the student decided to take off from a near midfield point. The examiner immediately aborted the takeoff and quizzed the student why he chose to do that. No coherent reply. Most of us at some point in our training were taught to *always* use the full length of the runway. Had the takeoff been allowed to continue, the high-tension power lines just off the departure end of the runway would have filled the windshield! Why would one break that rule, especially on a checkride? Lack of common sense or a flash of brain fog induced by the pressure of the checkride?

In today's world of flight training, there is a nationwide lack of experienced instructors and an extreme shortage of DPEs, especially for the advanced ratings. We're experiencing a two- to three-month wait to schedule commercial, instrument, and initial CFI checkrides. This situation adds a significant cost to the student to maintain the level of knowledge and proficiency required for the checkride. I hope the FAA can figure out a way to resolve this shortage.

The inexperienced instructors create a weakness in the flight training system. By the time an instructor has reached a level of confidence, experience, and some level of common sense, somewhere over 1,000 hours, they've moved up the food chain to pursue a career in aviation.

I met a middle-aged man a few days ago. He had accrued 53 hours of flight time and had not yet made his first solo flight. Delving further into his situation, he had worked with three new young instructors. Rather than using common sense and conducting an evaluation flight, each instructor started him from the beginning! Time and money wasted that need not to have been.

Inexperienced instructors often have no mentors to obtain advice. I've met several young CFIs who gave up instructing out of frustration. This is where advice, direction, and learning situational awareness comes from. Until that void is filled, we will continue to turn out a product that lacks the ability to be cognizant of the situation at hand and then know how to deal with the situation. Common sense, it has to be taught in this day and age. EAA

Steve Krog, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than five decades and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006, he launched what is now Kylie's Cub Air Flight, a flight training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.

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