

Tips for The Private Pilot Practical Exam

Yesterday one of my students took his Private Pilot Practical Exam. Did he pass? Yes, I'm proud to say. Here are some of the tips I use when training my students. The first 10 are the biggies, but please don't ignore the others. If I had to find a consistent thread in these tips, I'd say 'common sense' is the underlying theme.

1. Stress safety. A practical examination should employ the mindset you would use to take you and your family on a cross-country flight. In the real world you would be safe wouldn't you? Try to get the same mental attitude of safety with respect to every single question or maneuver during the exam. Ensure you pick out safe areas when selecting turns around a point, etc.
2. Be conservative. Develop a personal WX go/no-go set of minimums. Show how you over estimate the fuel burn and include it in your flight planning. Don't rely on the 30-minute fuel reserve for day VFR, bump it to say 90 minutes. Do what you would do for real in all of your decision-making. Have an alternate selected and include it in your 91.103 preflight actions.
3. Be legal. Know the rules for operation in FAR Part 91.
4. Use your checklist.
5. Only use a checklist anytime it is safe to use one. Whoa, this seems counter to 4. Not really, let's say we are doing full stop taxi-backs so as to get all of the required landings and takeoffs in. Don't start reading a checklist for that short field takeoff while actively taxiing. Instead wait at the hold short line, refer to the checklist, then put it away, get your clearance, scour the approach area with your eyeballs and then take the active and execute that perfect short field takeoff.
6. Fly inside the box. The practical exam is not a time to use a new setup for a power-off stall that you just saw on YouTube last night or in fact to do something as simple as introduce a new knee-board in the cockpit. Stay inside the box you have been trained for. E.g., when we practice simulated emergency engine out maneuvers, we break them off at 500' AGL unless we are setup over an airfield and can safely make the field. If the DPE asks you to do a maneuver, only do it if you can do it safely within the training parameters we have used.
7. Demonstrate and call out airmanship. If you get off altitude, airspeed, or heading, tell your DPE you are correcting. In the absence of any designated airspeed, altitude or heading, select one and tell the DPE what you are doing.
8. Be organized in the cockpit. Don't make a takeoff holding a checklist, pencil, or whatever in your hand. Have a place for everything, and everything in its place. Just like we trained.
9. It is the only time you, as a student pilot, can carry a person who is not an instructor. Think of the exam as an evaluation from a passenger's point of view. The DPE is not acting as an instructor, nor is he supposed to fly the airplane. In fact if he has to take over the controls in the interest of safety – well, you can imagine that you will not get your temporary license.
10. You are the PIC on the exam. You will log this time as PIC, but not solo. Your acts of authority as PIC should begin in the classroom. As PIC introduce your DPE to the airport environment and expectations of the tower and ground

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operators (i.e., downwind midpoint calls, and departure directions) would be good. Give your 'passenger' a safety briefing before going out to the airplane. Tell them that you, as PIC, require them to use their seatbelts at all times. Walk with them out to the ramp and point out the driveway just outside of the hanger. Keep the airplane key in your possession and out of the ignition until you are both in the airplane and buckled in. Stress safety.

11. Use the Practical Test Standards. The exam is really an open book evaluation. The PTS contains everything the DPE will evaluate you on.
12. Prepare with study guides. The little blue and white ASA Oral exam guide is a minimum guide for the oral. There are great videos on YouTube. Here are two of them: The first one I call surfer dude DPE; the presenter is an actual DPE, really! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVE-gleZUpk> The next one has some stilted acting, but is very good in the material they present. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr483zBbQKw> Study your maneuver handbook.
13. Be prepared. Have all of your paperwork in order. Have a printed copy of the 8710 that your instructor electronically signed. Know how to rapidly access all of the required hours for each of the categories. I highly encourage all to make a spreadsheet to list the categories and dates and hours as a means to rapidly go into the logbook. Use a checklist to make sure you have everything at hand as you walk into the school for the exam.
14. Have references handy. Sectional, AFD, FAR/AIM, POH as a minimum – make sure they are current. Sticky-tab your FAR/AIM for applicable Part 91 ops rules. Know how to use the index of the FAR/AIM.
15. Come prepared to learn. DPEs love to instruct. If they get into instructor mode, let them, it will make your exam easier.
16. Take a mock exam. A mock oral or flight exam is a good way to prepare.
17. Be professional, yet friendly. This goes along with being prepared to learn.
18. Relax. You have been properly trained. I will not sign someone off for their practical exam unless I believe they have been fully trained and are competent to pass the exam. In fact I cannot legally do so.