

EVALUATING PRACTICAL TEST APPLICANTS: DETERMINING PERSONALITY AND PREPARATION

Designated Pilot Examiners all know applicants are stressed to one degree or another during practical tests. It is our responsibility to ensure that a fair evaluation is given in spite of the impediment of anxious behaviors. The ground portion is likely to be an unfamiliar form of testing to most people, since our educational system relies heavily on written rather than oral tests. Pilot examiners are challenged to ask valid questions with an emphasis on scenario format and to attempt to determine if the applicant can function at the application and correlation levels and not simply offer rote answers. There is a great deal of psychology that is used in trying to get an applicant comfortable enough to show his or her preparation. We have to guard against leading an applicant, and yet can sometimes rephrase things to find out if the knowledge is adequate. We can also leave a subject and come back to it when they seem to get off track.

We have all experienced at least four distinct applicant demeanors which we can summarize as follows:

WELL PREPARED AND REASONABLY CALM

The best applicants have been thoroughly prepared and had some sort of mock checkride. They know the PTS and have practiced with scenario questioning. These people can be calm because they are confident that they know the material. These are the easiest to evaluate and take the least time on the ground. Another sign of this type of applicant is a knowledge test score in the 90's. There may be very few errors, and they will generally pass on the flight portion as well.

WELL PREPARED AND EXTREMELY NERVOUS

These applicants probably also have high scores on the knowledge test, but will often confess to or exhibit a bad case of nerves early on. Some will answer a different question than the one that was asked, go into extraordinary and unnecessary detail or simply look panicked from time to time. Giving some guidance as to parameters of what is being asked is usually a good thing. Bringing them back to the exact subject might be called for. Switching to a more rote section briefly might calm some of them. We generally can discover if these applicants really do know the material. If they get wound up on a subject it might work to bring that area up in another context. Resisting the urge to lead them can be difficult since one feels sympathy for

them, generally. It sometimes helps to take a moment and talk about something unrelated to testing, perhaps some experience they have had during training. Reminding them that the ground portion does not have to be 100% can help. In spite of our efforts, they may not be able to get through this the first time, but we should give them a reasonable try at it. This applicant will usually take the most time on the ground portion. We can use our judgment to present questions in a couple of ways to get at the knowledge. If an instructor knows that they have this kind of applicant, he or she should definitely have mock checkrides done by another instructor not familiar to the applicant.

POORLY PREPARED AND NERVOUS

Applicants who have not been well prepared and have not worked hard enough in advance of the test often have very low scores on the knowledge test and maybe even multiple takes. They are likely to be nervous due to the lack of knowledge and are unlikely to get calmer when they start giving poor answers. While we can attempt some of the techniques mentioned in the second type, we have to resist modifying the test for lower standards or more rote responses. We should continue testing only until they have clearly failed to be adequately prepared overall. This might be on a special emphasis area such as stall spin awareness or a general lack of adequate knowledge on a couple other subjects. This will often be the shortest ground portion. We can be sympathetic with their nerves, but must debrief thoroughly and offer direction for improvement as part of the disapproval process.

POORLY PREPARED AND CALM

Occasionally an applicant can be poorly prepared and not be nervous. Some do not take the activity seriously and some think they are good enough and will not be found deficient. They may think the test will be easy for them or the examiner not insightful. Some applicants know so little about the scope of the test, that they do not recognize that they should know a lot more than they do. The end result will be the same as above, but they may not be receptive to debriefing. In this situation, a separate debrief with the instructor would be helpful.

CHICAGO DESIGNATED PILOT EXAMINER ASSOCIATION

SUMMARY

The instructors are responsible for the preparation of the students. If poor preparation is the cause of a failure, the instructor should be debriefed in detail and encouraged to be more thorough. They are responsible for the quality of their work and should never rely on the examiner to “sort things out” with a lazy or demanding student. It is the examiner's responsibility to be patient with those who are prepared and simply nervous and work to give them a fair test.

SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE EVALUATION

The outcome of the entire practical test is guided by the Practical Test Standards as applied by the examiner. Many tasks have measurable standards which can be cited when determining the result. However, the introduction to the PTS uses the phrase “consistently exceeding the standards” as a cause for failure. It is then the subjective duty of the examiner to decide what amounts to “consistently.” In general, examiners view the overall performance and use subjectivity to pass applicants when presented with a well prepared and safe pilot who briefly exceeds standards. When failing an applicant, there will be objective standards which can be cited in the PTS, Airplane Flying Handbook or Pilots Operating Handbook. When failure occurs during the ground portion, it is not the result of one or two missed questions. Examiners brief applicants that the ground portion is not expected to be 100%. We all give different weight to areas that are simple detail and those that involve safety or potential violations of regulations. We are directed to pay more attention to “Special Emphasis Areas” which are all related to subjects involving potential serious accidents. Therefore, an applicant who cannot give clear answers to Stall Spin Awareness questions may get no further than that on the ground. Those who stumble on some uncommon airspace weather minimums will get to continue to other subjects. If the list of missed factual questions gets too long, there will be a failure.

Examiners start each test with the same goal as the applicant, to conclude with the issuance of a certificate or rating. We have FAA standards and our personal experience to rely on. We want all pilots to be safe for themselves and those around them.