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The Complete Private Pilot

Tenth Edition
Bob Gardner

Sport Pilot Addendum

Overview

The sport pilot certificate is perfect for those who dream of flying just for fun, for those who don't want the hassle of FAA medical examinations, or those who want to investigate the world of flight before moving up to higher certificates or making aviation a career.

“Just for fun” means daytime, dicky-bird weather, a light sport airplane (LSA) that is relatively slow, able to carry only one passenger, and away from airports that require radio communication. Do the words “pancake fly-in” or “hundred-dollar hamburger” make you prick up your ears? You are a candidate for the sport pilot (SP) certificate.

What are the prerequisites?

You must be at least 17 years old at the time of your practical test, and you must be able to speak, read, write, and understand English; if you cannot meet these requirements for medical reasons, the FAA may place limitations on your pilot certificate. You need a student pilot certificate before you begin training, and you can get one from any designated pilot or sport pilot examiner for about \$25. If you intend to fly using your driver's license instead of an FAA medical certificate, be sure to tell the person from whom you get the student pilot certificate...there is a separate application form for those who will be using their driver's license.

Medical Certificate?

One of the major attractions of the SP is that you do not need an FAA medical certificate; your driver's license does the trick. If your driver's license has any restrictions, they apply equally to its use for the SP certificate. If you have ever applied for an FAA medical certificate and had it denied, however, you can't go the driver's license route. And if you are aware of any medical condition that would make you unable to operate an LSA safely you are also out of luck. Note that the FAA cross-checks with other agencies for people receiving disability compensation.

Flight Experience?

Before you can be signed off by a Certified Flight Instructor with a Sport Pilot rating (called a Subpart K instructor), you must have logged *at least* 20 hours of flight time including 15 hours of flight instruction and at least 5 hours of solo flight training in the Practical Test Standard areas of operation. When you consider that a plain-vanilla private pilot applicant must have logged a minimum of 40 hours, SP training affords real savings.

The 15 hours of flight training will include two hours of cross-country flight (25 nautical miles), ten takeoffs and landings to a full stop at an airport (hopefully, several airports), including flight in the traffic pattern, and three hours of training specifically for the practical test. During the cross-country flight you will learn to navigate by pilotage, dead reckoning, and electronic aids if the airplane is so equipped.

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This training will come in handy for your required 75 nautical mile solo cross-country flight with a full-stop landing at a minimum of two airports, including one segment consisting of 25 nautical miles between takeoff and landing.

It should be noted that if you decide to turn your SP certificate into a private pilot certificate at a later date, there are some caveats: Your SP training should be done by an instructor operating under Subpart H of the FAA regulations...just make sure at the outset that the instructor understands your goals. Flight training hours to be used toward both an SP and a private certificate must be logged as meeting the requirements of both. If the time is not logged properly, i.e. “Rectangular course, completed for Sport and Private per 61.107b and 61.311,” you will have to do the extra 20 hours required of any private pilot applicant. Don’t hesitate to question your instructor about his or her qualifications to provide the training you need.

How will my training differ from that of a private pilot applicant?

Stick-and-rudder skills—the ability to fly—are no different regardless of your end goal; the airplane does not know what your plans are. Comparing the Practical Test Standard for the private pilot certificate with the PTS for the SP certificate, there are very few differences, and if you train to private pilot standards (and get the appropriate logbook endorsements), you can’t go wrong.

The Sport Pilot PTS includes “Principles of Flight,” which is not part of the Private Pilot PTS (but should be). It is also more specific in checking your knowledge of emergency equipment appropriate to different geographic locations.

The Private Pilot PTS covers flight by reference to instruments, something that is not required of sport pilot applicants unless they are training in an aircraft with a maximum cruise speed faster than 87 knots. You should ask your instructor for training to meet these standards within the capabilities of your LSA:

- Straight-and-level flight
- Constant airspeed climbs
- Constant airspeed descents
- Turns to headings
- Recovery from unusual attitudes

You should also be trained in radio communications, navigation systems appropriate to your LSA, and use of radar services—not as prerequisites for your SP certificate but to eliminate the restriction on flight into airspace requiring radio communication as a sport pilot.

Ground training? Ground school?

Neither the sport nor the private pilot certificate requires that you attend a ground school, only that you receive *and log* ground training in the subjects listed in 14 CFR §61.107 for the private and 14 CFR §61.309 for sport pilot certification. Note: Flight instructors occasionally gloss over the need to log ground training, but examiners pick up this omission. Passing the knowledge exams does not eliminate this requirement.

Many students choose to attend ground school in preparation for the knowledge test, and sport pilot-specific ground schools might be hard to find. Not to worry...any private pilot ground school will equip you to pass the SP knowledge exam with the exception of subjects like sport pilot privileges and limitations; those can be found in Subpart J to Part 61 of the Federal Aviation Regulations. You can read and download the regulations from www.faa.gov.

Are there any tests?

Yes, indeed...there are tests. Your instructor will administer a short pre-solo written examination based on 14 CFR §61.87(b). You will have to take a knowledge exam (“the written”); your instructor will evaluate your home-study course or ground school completion record and certify by logbook endorsement that you are prepared to take the test. With the knowledge test passed, the next and final hurdle is the practical examination (checkride) with an FAA-designated examiner. Your instructor will set this up for you...the number of qualified LSA examiners is small but growing.

What is an LSA, anyway?

It is an aircraft other than a helicopter or powered-lift with a maximum takeoff weight of not more than 1,320 pounds (for landplanes...1,430 pounds for seaplanes), with a maximum speed in level flight of not more than 120 knots calibrated airspeed (CAS) on a standard day at sea level, a maximum stall speed of not more than 45 knots, a maximum seating capacity of two persons (including the pilot), fixed landing gear, and a single engine with a fixed-pitch propeller.

Applicants for the Sport Pilot certificate who train in airplanes with a maximum cruising speed of 87 knots or less do not have to demonstrate the ability to fly solely by reference to the flight instruments; applicants training in airplanes with faster maximum cruising speed must learn to fly by instrument reference before embarking on cross-country training. This is in preparation for the possibility of encountering loss of visual reference due to unforecasted

weather. Your instructor will provide the necessary training and logbook endorsement.

The advent of the sport pilot certificate has resulted in an explosion of innovation; there are hundreds of models of light sport aircraft—but is LSA training available near you? Ideally, you will go to a flight school specializing in LSA training; a web search can narrow down your choices. It may be that the cost of traveling to an LSA school will be offset by the saving in time and dollars compared to private pilot training. However, there are many flight schools that, while not specializing in LSA training, do have LSAs as part of their training fleet.

There are several “old” airplanes that meet the weight and maximum speed requirements to be considered a light sport aircraft; go to the website shown below* for a complete list. You cannot solo or take the SP checkride in an airplane that does not meet LSA standards.

It should be noted that light sport airplanes are more subject to headwinds, crosswinds, and turbulence than “regular” training airplanes because of their lighter weights and slower airspeeds. This puts a premium on thorough flight planning and weather awareness...and that’s not a bad thing.

Am I stuck with those speed limitations forever?

Not at all. When you pass your checkride, the FAA will provide you with a Sport Pilot certificate with no category or class ratings, and of course you will have taken the checkride in an LSA that meets the description above. The examiner will provide a logbook endorsement for the category, class, and make/model of the airplane for which you are qualified to act as pilot-in-command. Subsequent to that, just receive and log ground and flight training from an authorized instructor and you will receive a logbook endorsement authorizing you to act as PIC in the new make and model. Keep your logbook with you, of course, and make backup copies often.

Will I ever be able to fly into a tower-controlled airport?

Once again, receive and log ground and flight training on operations at an airport with an operating control tower, use of radios, navigation systems, and radar services, and make three takeoffs and landings to a full stop at a towered airport. Your instructor’s logbook endorsement removes the shackles.

* www.aopa.org/whatsnew/regulatory/sport_aircraft.html

Are there any restrictions I can’t get rid of?

Sorry. You still won’t be able to carry more than one passenger, fly at night, or over clouds that obscure the surface, and you won’t be able to fly higher than 10,000 feet above sea level or 2,000 feet above the ground, whichever is higher, even in the unlikely event that your engine will take you that high. But you will be flying with friends and accumulating hours, while a private-pilot-bound student is still working toward that 40-hour minimum.

What will it take to upgrade to a Private Pilot certificate?

First and foremost, a medical certificate. The days of relying on your driver’s license will be over at this point. Then compare the numbers:

Flight instruction: The PP certificate requires a minimum of 20 hours of flight instruction, while the SP requires only 15 hours of flight training (which count toward your total). You will get the five extra hours and then some, because you will need 3 hours of night flight training including a 100-nautical-mile trip and 3 hours of training in flight by reference to instruments. Add on 3 hours of training specifically for the checkride and you are well over the hours required.

Solo flight: The PP requires a minimum of 10 hours, including 5 hours of solo cross-country time, and to get your SP certificate you logged a minimum of 5 hours all by yourself including a 75-nautical mile cross-country trip. With your SP certificate in your pocket, however, you are free to fly as far as you like...so why not take a trip spanning 150 nautical miles, stopping at a minimum of three points with one non-stop segment of 50 nautical miles? At least one of these stops should be at a tower-controlled airport, and touch-and-goes don’t count. Meeting this requirement should be a snap. Keep in mind that for a sport pilot, “cross-country” means “more than 25 nautical miles,” while for private, commercial, and instrument applicants it means “more than 50 nautical miles.”

...And there is another knowledge examination and checkride to pass. But getting a Sport Pilot certificate saves time and money and is an excellent first step toward a flying career.

Go for it!