



June 2024 Newsletter

The Ins and Outs of Air Traffic Control

For many people communicating with air traffic control is a source of great stress. Many ask themselves, What did they say? What does that mean? Why are they talking so fast? Was that for me? If at any point in time you have had any of these thoughts running through your head, know you are in good company. Learning and understanding air traffic control can be a daunting task and sometimes difficult to navigate. I worked as an Air Traffic Controller for 21 years and here is some advice that may be helpful.

You should never key the mic until you know what you want to say. Air traffic control can be a very stressful job and the controllers are often juggling multiple tasks at a time. They are thinking about their next steps and constantly planning ahead. Nothing slows this process down more than "dead air." Dead air, also referred to as thinking on frequency, is when you key the mic with the best intentions, but end up making a long winded request or saying nothing at all. Dead air can happen for multiple reasons, you know what you want to say, but suddenly get stage fright, and the thoughts leave your head, or you didn't know what you wanted to say but tried to figure it out as you went along, or you knew exactly what you wanted to say and got distracted and drifted off task. All of these situations can and will happen, and that's OK. Over time and with experience you will naturally become proficient. I recommend the website liveatc.net where you can listen until your hearts content and soak it all in. You should take some time and listen in when you can because we can all learn from good and bad examples. In your upcoming flights, remember to take an extra few seconds to mature your thoughts into a concise transmission so that you can maximize efficiency for both you and the controller.

Another practice you should adopt if you have not already is frequency change etiquette. After a frequency change has been issued and you "flip the switch", please take a moment and simply monitor the frequency. This will allow you to ensure that you are not interrupting a clearance that could be awaiting a readback. If you end up blocking a transmission, that transmission will need to be repeated. This is an unnecessary increase in workload that can be easily avoided.....just be patient. We all share the airspace as well as the frequencies. We should take every opportunity to be a "good neighbor".



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In the aviation industry, training is a constant across all disciplines. I can attest to the unbelievable amount of training occurring in the air traffic controller ranks on a daily basis. If you hear frustration in the controllers voices, consider the fact that just like you, they may be in the training environment and are feeling the pressures associated with wanting to do a good job.. Do not take their frustration personally. I assure you they have very short memories and will not hold you missteps against you. Air traffic controllers are not superhuman, they are people just like you trying to do a job to the best of their ability, just like you.

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