

NO FEAR OF FLYING

Remember the first time you saw someone operating a radio-controlled plane? You were hooked. You had to have one. You raced to the hobby shop thinking you could just buy a plane and find a wide-open space to start flying. If you talked to the staff at the hobby shop, you quickly learned there is a lot more to it. Getting into radio-control hobbies isn't rocket science, but everyone could stand a primer. We've put together a beginner's guide to ensure a smooth take-off.

PREPARE FOR TAKE-OFF

Just like real pilots, radio-control pilots need to spend some time in ground school. Get to know the terminology. Do you know what glow engines are yet? What about buddy boxes? You can probably think of many reasons why you'll enjoy the hobby, but have you thought about drawbacks?

Talk to experienced enthusiasts. You can start at your local hobby shop. Ask about flying clubs in your area. You can also get more information at the Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA) Web site. <<http://www.modelaircraft.org>>

FIND A CO-PILOT

Operating a radio-controlled plane is not as easy as an experienced flyer makes it seem. A training partner reduces the risk of crashing and will save you money in the end. If you have a friend who will help you, great. Be sure you have a wide-open space where you can practice without annoying neighbors or damaging your plane, property, or people. Be sure you have insurance coverage for yourself and others in case of injury. Planes can do property damage, especially when operated at high speeds. Your homeowner's insurance may cover you; check your policy to be sure. You can also obtain insurance by joining the AMA. <<http://www.modelaircraft.org>>

If you don't have a friend and a safe field to practice, be sure to join a flying club. John Flood, President of the West Pasco Model Pilots Association, Inc. in Odessa, Florida <<http://www.wpmpa.org>>, has been flying radio-controlled planes for over 30 years. Flood says it's very important to train with an experienced flyer: "Most planes do about 35 M.P.H.," says Flood, "but your brain is only doing 15 M.P.H. It really improves your eye-hand coordination."

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT

Flying a radio-control plane is fun. It's also a big responsibility. You're operating a machine that typically flies at 35 M.P.H. when you're training. Performance models can go up to 90 M.P.H. Protect yourself and respect other people by always operating your

plane safely. Be sure you're prepared to take responsibility for damages or injuries. While injuries usually aren't fatal, they can be.

READY, SET AND SPEND

Most flyers and shop owners we talked to estimated that getting started with a reliable training plane will cost anywhere from \$180-\$225 for an electric plane, and \$280-\$325 for a gas plane.

If you join a club, there will be an initiation fee and yearly membership dues, usually around \$80-\$140.

Clubs require membership in the AMA <<http://www.modelaircraft.org>>. The \$58 membership fee includes insurance and countless other benefits. For more information, visit the AMA Membership Services page at <<http://www.modelaircraft.org/memberservices.asp>>.

SELECT A TRAINING PLANE

Like any hobby or sport, it is usually best to avoid extremes when you first start out. Don't get the cheapest plane you can find, you'll probably be disappointed and quickly outgrow it. Look for something quality, but don't sink a lot of money into the high-end planes designed for acrobatics or high speeds. You want something you can handle.

Used or New?

You may be able to save money with a used plane. As with buying a car, be cautious. Buying from someone you know or a trustworthy member of your flying club may reduce the chances you'll end up grounded.

You may be tempted to buy second-hand radio equipment. Keep in mind that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has rules governing radio frequencies. Radio equipment made before 1993 could interfere with commercial use frequencies. Before buying bargain equipment from yesteryear, be sure it's legal to operate. If you are an AMA member, using illegal frequencies also violates their safety code, which is available in .PDF format at <<http://www.modelaircraft.org/PDF-files/105.pdf>>.

Electric or Gas?

Traditionally, gas planes reigned in the performance department. However, today's electric planes have more efficient motors and lighter, more powerful batteries. Remember that you don't need a lot of power for a training plane. You can always upgrade.

Gas planes have their drawbacks. You're carrying a combustible fluid that leaves an oily residue. The noise often bothers neighbors and you may find you require hearing protection if the engine noise breaks the 82 dB level.

Electric planes offer more flexibility than gas planes: less noise means you can fly them at the local football field. Since you don't have to manually start the propeller, there is also less chance for injury.

However, if you like the sound of a gas-powered engine, you'll be disappointed with an electric plane. Another downside is making sure you have charged spare batteries or waiting for batteries to recharge. A typical battery will usually power a plane for 20-25 minutes. A full tank in a gas-powered plane provides about 15 minutes of flying time.

BACK AT THE HANGAR

Now that you're flying solo, don't forget that you'll incur expenses for gas or batteries and repairs. Propellers break and crashes happen. The good news is that maintenance costs aren't prohibitive. A crashed plane may look terrible, but when you get it home, you'll often find that all you need is some glue to get the plane back in good condition. In a typical year, it may cost the beginner \$15-\$25 without a crash, upwards of \$50 with a crash.

As you progress, you may also want to upgrade. Be sure your first plane has a good selection of repair and replacement parts. A reputable store will have a good selection of parts such as landing gear, motors, structural components, linkages and fasteners. If you want to get a better idea of the parts and accessories you'll be working with, ask the staff at your local hobby shop or favorite online hobby site.

You're off to a good start. Check back in; you'll find more articles on remote-control planes in the coming months. Happy flying!