

THE CLEARANCE YOU EXPECTED TO HEAR — Key Takeaways for Part 91 Pilots

1. Why Expectation Drift Happens

- Familiar airspace builds strong predictions
- Workload accelerates assumptions
- Busy frequencies create gaps the brain fills automatically
- Visual cues can confirm the *wrong* aircraft
- Readbacks can be confidently wrong if the mental model is wrong

Core idea: A communication can appear successful while the pilot and controller are operating from different mental pictures.

2. The Error Chain

- **Expect** — You anticipate what should happen
- **Assume** — New information gets interpreted through that expectation
- **Stop Verifying** — Everything still feels normal
- **Commit** — You descend, turn, follow, enter, continue
- **Error Becomes Visible** — Often too late

The earliest break point is before commitment.

3. The Model: Expect Less → Observe More → Interrupt Early

Expect Less

- Anticipate without committing
- Treat familiar patterns as helpful, not guaranteed

Observe More

- Actively look for what *doesn't* fit
- Verify identity before verifying content
- Challenge visual assumptions

Interrupt Early

- When something feels off, pause

- Slow the *decision*, not the airplane
- Two seconds of cognitive delay can prevent two miles of commitment

4. Verification Techniques That Work

- Read back altitude, runway, vector, restrictions clearly
- Include full call sign when doubt exists
- Use “VERIFY CLEARANCE FOR <call sign>” when identity is uncertain
- Treat unexpected instructions as update cues
- Confirm traffic identity, not just traffic presence

5. Familiar Airspace = Higher Risk

- Repetition builds strong expectations
- Strong expectations reduce challenge behavior
- The airport you know best may be where you carry the most assumptions

6. Quick Self-Assessment

Ask these four questions after any flight:

1. What did I assume?
2. What supported that assumption?
3. What contradicted it?
4. What should have triggered a review?

Bottom Line

Expectation drift is subtle, normal, and correctable. Your earliest sense that something doesn't fit is not a nuisance — it's your first opportunity to stay ahead of the airplane, the frequency, and the situation.