

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 → Assume → Stop Verifying → Commit → Error Becomes Visible

- **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, or continue.
- **Error Becomes Visible** — Often too late.

The earliest break point is before commitment.

3. The Expected Clearance Is the Hardest One to Detect

- An unexpected clearance creates a natural reason to verify.
- An expected clearance may create no warning at all.
- Strong expectation can influence how new information is interpreted.
- The pilot may never experience a conscious mismatch.

- Verification must sometimes begin before anything feels wrong.

Key idea:

The problem is not always that you ignored something that did not fit. Sometimes your expectation made it fit.

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

Expect Less

- Anticipate without committing.
- Treat familiar patterns as helpful, not guaranteed.
- Don't let prediction become perception.

Observe More

- Capture what is actually happening.
- Actively look for what doesn't fit.
- Verify identity before verifying content.
- Challenge visual assumptions.

Interrupt Early

- Don't wait for certainty that something is wrong.
 - Slow the decision, not the airplane.
 - Resolve important uncertainty before commitment.
-

5. Verification Techniques That Work

- Capture the actual altitude, runway, vector, or restriction before acting.
- Read back what was actually heard, not what was expected.
- Include the full call sign when doubt exists.
- Use “VERIFY CLEARANCE FOR ” when identity is uncertain.
- Treat unexpected instructions **and strong expectations** as verification cues.
- Confirm traffic identity, not just traffic presence.

6. Familiar Airspace = Higher Risk

- Repetition builds strong expectations.
 - Strong expectations reduce challenge behavior.
 - Familiar procedures can make deviations harder to recognize.
 - The airport you know best may be where you carry the most assumptions.
 - Familiarity should increase verification discipline, not reduce it.
-

7. Quick Self-Assessment

Ask yourself 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.

An unexpected instruction is one opportunity to verify.

But you don't have to wait for something to feel unexpected.

When your expectation is strong, make sure it hasn't become your perception.

The earliest opportunity to stay ahead of the airplane is often **before the mismatch becomes obvious.**