

VFR Pattern ATC Readbacks

A practical handout for precise pilot–controller communication

THE PRACTICAL RULE

Read back the critical numbers. Acknowledge the rest. Clarify anything unclear.

This is a training shorthand—not a quotation of an AIM requirement. The AIM distinguishes between general acknowledgment, recommended readbacks of specific critical elements, and instructions for which a readback is specifically required.

1. What the AIM Says Pilots Should Read Back

AIM 4-4-7(b) identifies three principal categories whose critical portions should be read back: **altitude assignments and restrictions, vectors, and runway assignments**. The purpose is mutual verification: the controller can detect a misunderstanding, and the pilot confirms what was heard.

ATC instruction	Appropriate pilot response
"Maintain 1,500."	"Maintain 1,500, Cherokee 3AB."
"Do not descend below 1,200."	"Do not descend below 1,200, Cherokee 3AB."
"Fly heading 090."	"Heading 090, Cherokee 3AB."
"Runway 27, cleared touch-and-go."	"Runway 27, cleared touch-and-go, 2CD."

2. Acknowledgment Is Not the Same as Readback

A pilot must acknowledge ATC communications and should include the aircraft identification in readbacks and acknowledgments. An acknowledgment tells ATC that the message was received and understood; a readback repeats specified critical information so both parties can verify it.

For an instruction such as "Extend downwind," "Report midfield downwind," or "Make right 360 for spacing," a specific numerical readback is not ordinarily called for by AIM 4-4-7(b). An acknowledgment such as "Extend downwind, Cherokee 3AB" is appropriate. "Wilco" means the pilot will comply, and should be used only when that is what the pilot intends.

3. The Important Exception: Runway Hold-Short Instructions

Runway hold-short instructions are specifically required to be read back. AIM 5-5-2 directs pilots to read back any hold-short-of-runway instruction issued by ATC. This is not merely the general AIM "should read back" guidance for altitude, vectors, and runway assignments.

The requirement is to read back the hold-short instruction; the AIM does not require a word-for-word, "verbatim" reproduction of the controller's entire transmission.

4. VFR Pattern Examples

ATC	Pilot	Why
"Extend downwind, maintain 1,500."	"Extend downwind, maintain 1,500, 3AB."	Acknowledge the instruction; read back the altitude.
"Runway 27, cleared touch-and-go."	"Runway 27, cleared touch-and-go, 2CD."	Runway assignment is a critical readback element.
"Heading 090, re-enter left downwind."	"Heading 090, 8EF."	Read back the vector; acknowledge the remainder.
"Extend downwind."	"Extend downwind, 5GH."	Normally an acknowledgment, not a specific readback.
"Make right 360 for spacing."	"Right 360 for spacing, 4JK."	No special AIM numerical readback category; confirm understanding.

5. No Number Does Not Mean "Unimportant"

The absence of a number does **not** mean an instruction can be treated casually. “Follow the Cessna ahead,” “Make short approach,” or “Turn base now” may be operationally significant even though they do not fall within the AIM’s principal numerical readback categories.

If the instruction is unclear, ambiguous, or unacceptable from a safety standpoint, do not manufacture certainty with “Roger.” Ask for clarification or an amended clearance/instruction.

6. Three Communication Controls to Remember

1. READ BACK Altitude assignments/restrictions, vectors, and runway assignments.
2. ACKNOWLEDGE Confirm receipt and understanding of other ATC instructions; include your aircraft identification.
3. CLARIFY If you did not understand, are unsure what ATC intends, or cannot safely comply, say so before acting.

FAA References

- **AIM 4-4-7(b), Pilot/Controller Roles and Responsibilities** — readback of altitude assignments/restrictions, vectors, and runway assignments; aircraft identification in readbacks and acknowledgments.
- **AIM 5-5-2, Traffic Advisory Practices / Pilot Responsibilities** — pilot readback of runway hold-short instructions and clarification when a clearance or instruction is not understood or cannot be safely accepted.
- **FAA Pilot/Controller Glossary, “ACKNOWLEDGE”** — acknowledgment means letting ATC know the message was received and understood.

Important: This handout is a practical training aid. It is not a substitute for the current AIM, ATC procedures, regulations, or an ATC clearance/instruction applicable to a particular operation.

Prepared for seminar use • Based on FAA AIM guidance current to the seminar preparation date