

As PIC I Must Know What I Don't Know

A Practical Technique for Catching the Mistake Before I Make It

Experienced pilots generally know how to plan, fly, navigate, communicate, and manage risk. The problem is that an experienced pilot can sometimes act on an assumption without realizing that an assumption is being made.

The question is not:

“What could go wrong?”

It is:

“What must be true for the action I am about to take to be correct?”

When the answer matters, establish how you will know it is true **before** you act.

The Technique

Before A Consequential Action:

1. IDENTIFY

What am I about to rely on?

2. DEPEND

What must be true for my next action to be correct?

3. ESTABLISH

How will I know that it is true?

4. VERIFY

Before or immediately after acting, confirm that reality agrees with what I expected.

In One Sentence

Before I act, I identify what the action depends on and decide how I will know it is true.

This is not a requirement to verify everything. It is a way to recognize **which things deserve verification because the next action depends on them.**

Example 1 — The Turn

You are taxiing at an unfamiliar or complex airport. You are approaching a turn you believe is Taxiway Delta. **What are you about to do? Turn onto Delta. What does that action depend on? That this is actually Delta.**

That may sound obvious. But if you have already formed the expectation “*this is Delta*,” you may be preparing to turn before consciously confirming it.

Apply the technique

IDENTIFY:

I am about to turn.

DEPEND:

The turn is correct only if I have correctly identified the taxiway.

ESTABLISH:

Before the turn, what will tell me this is Delta?

- Taxiway sign
- Pavement marking
- Airport diagram
- Expected geometry

VERIFY:

After turning, does what I see continue to agree with my expectation? **The important part** The technique did not tell you to “**look for the Delta sign.**” It caused you to recognize **before the turn** that taxiway identity was a dependency of the action. That is the point.

Example 2 — The Sanford Descent

Approaching Sanford, you begin a descent. The descent itself may be entirely normal. But ask: **Why am I descending?** Perhaps the answer is:

- Normal 1,000-foot descent
- Normal 500-foot descent
- For traffic
- Another specific operational reason

The technique exposes the dependency: **My descent should have a reason that I can state.** If the answer is clear, continue. If the answer is vague, *“Because that's what we normally do here.”* you have discovered something worth examining **before the descent becomes consequential.**

The technique in action

IDENTIFY:

I am about to descend.

DEPEND:

The descent depends on having a valid reason for descending now and knowing what that reason requires.

ESTABLISH:

State the reason.

VERIFY:

Does what I am seeing and doing continue to make sense for that reason?

The important part

The technique did not add another procedure to the descent. It exposed an assumption that might otherwise remain invisible.

What The Technique Is Looking For

The most useful opportunities often occur at **transitions**:

- Before a turn
- Before a descent
- Before changing an altitude
- Before entering a runway
- Before changing a frequency
- Before accepting an amended clearance
- Before relying on traffic information
- Before changing the planned route
- Before continuing when the situation is no longer what you expected

At each transition, ask: **What am I about to do—and what does it depend on?** If the dependency is consequential: **How will I know?**

Another Example — The Clearance

ATC gives you an amended clearance. You understand the words. But your next action depends on something more than simply hearing the clearance. **What must be true? I must correctly understand what I am expected to do.** A useful validation might be to mentally reconstruct the clearance on the chart or avionics before acting. If the route, altitude, or heading does not fit what you expected, **that discrepancy is information.** You have found the problem while there is still time to resolve it.

Another Example — The Traffic

You have traffic in sight. You say: **“I have the traffic.”** Your next maneuver now depends on that identification being correct. The question is not merely whether you saw an airplane. It is: **Is that the airplane my action depends on?** If the answer is uncertain, the uncertainty is itself a reason to pause before allowing the sighting to become the basis for action.

The Pattern

The situations are different. The technique is the same.

Before I...	I need to know...	So I establish...
Turn	This is the taxiway I think it is	Sign / marking / diagram / geometry
Descend	Why I am descending	The specific reason
Accept a clearance	I understand what I am expected to do	Clearance reconstructed against the plan
Act on traffic	This is the traffic my action depends on	Identity, position, and movement

The technique does not predict the mistake. It identifies **the fact that must be true to prevent the mistake.**

When Should I Use It?

You do not need to do this before every routine action. Use it when an action is:

- **Consequential**
- **Based on an assumption**
- **Dependent on something that may have changed**
- **Difficult to reverse**
- **Likely to consume time or options if wrong**

The more consequential the action, the more deliberate the validation should be.

The Payoff

The goal is not to become more cautious about everything. The goal is to catch the **one thing that matters** before it becomes the mistake. A pilot may not recognize: *“I am about to make a mistake.”* But the pilot may be able to recognize: **“This action depends on something being true—and I have not established how I will know that it is true.”** That is the opening. Once you see it, you still have time to act.

The Cockpit Prompt

When something important is about to happen:

WHAT AM I ABOUT TO DO?

WHAT DOES IT DEPEND ON?

HOW WILL I KNOW?

Then act. And verify that reality continues to agree with the plan.

Remember

- **Don't try to verify everything.**
- **Identify what your next consequential action depends on.**
- **Decide how you will know it is true.**
- **Then verify.**

That is how an experienced PIC can discover a mistake before making it.