

Should I Train for my License in a Cirrus?



by John Fiscus

One of the very common questions I get asked as a Cirrus Instructor is whether or not it is useful to do primary training in pursuit of a license or rating in the Cirrus. More often than not, the answer to that question is a resounding, yes! In this article I will discuss why (and sometimes why not) training in a Cirrus makes sense.

Private License

My company has completed over 38 private licenses in Cirrus aircraft in the last four years with roughly 60 percent of those licenses being done in the SR22. The first point that must be understood when a pilot is considering this type of training is that it is no small task.

The pros:

Cirrus aircraft are among the most well-equipped and most safely designed aircraft in the GA market today. For the aspiring aviator/aircraft owner, it makes nothing but sense to start training in the aircraft type that will be (or already is) owned by that person. Familiarity with the systems and no need to unlearn improper habits gained

from other aircraft make this decision a quick and easy one. Ask any Cirrus owner who did most of their training in a Cessna prior to flying their SR20/SR22 how the transition went; you'll get an understanding of how much negative transfer the old trainers really induce.

Time in type also helps a person get much more comfortable in the air (transitions tend to detract from comfort) and when a pilot is comfortable they can perform at their peak. When a stressful situation arises, peak performance is critical.

A common question that I'm asked is, "Is this plane too powerful for me?" My answer is that while there certainly are more horses to handle and things can happen more

quickly, the throttle does not have to be full forward all the time. Basic flying skills are initially learned at slower speeds (which the Cirrus handles wonderfully) and a full degree of comfort is built over time to encompass the total power capabilities of the airplane.

The cons:

Most of the reasons a person would not want to get their private license in a Cirrus revolve around money and time (at the sacrifice of some degree of safety). First, a Cirrus is more expensive to rent than a Cessna. While the rental price isn't quite double that of a standard trainer, it is a fair bet that the cost will be roughly 60 to 70 percent more.

The amount of time it takes to get a license in a Cirrus is also above-average when compared to the FAA's minimums (which are more easily met in a Cessna or Piper). The two costs involved here are a result of more flight time being put on the aircraft (and thus greater rental fees figuring 70 hours of flight time) and a longer training duration from start to finish. The reason for the increased training duration is to ensure total comfort with the avionics and power.

The only times I recommend that someone obtain their license in something other than the Cirrus are when they've nearly completed the training anyway. For example, when I speak with someone who has 50 hours in a Cessna and is a few lessons away from their check ride, the time and money savings far outweigh essentially starting over in a Cirrus. To those folks, I recommend a *lengthy* stint of training in their new Cirrus immediately following aircraft delivery. Take five to seven full days and fly all over creation with an experienced Cirrus instructor to ensure you've been exposed to the intricacies of the airplane. This also helps to thoroughly 'unlearn' all the habits gained from the previous training aircraft.

Instrument Rating

We have completed over 100 instrument ratings in Cirrus aircraft. I can say without hesitation that if there is one license/rating that the aspiring or present Cirrus owner really should do in an SR20/SR22, it is this one.

The pros:

The Cirrus is really designed to be an IFR machine. A large part of the Garmin, Avidyne, and S-TEC autopilot systems are meant to help make IFR flying easier. By that same

token, it is immensely useful to spend 50-plus hours (the average flight time spent getting an instrument rating) learning how those systems work. Flying nothing but VOR radials and NDB approaches in another airplane will do very little to prepare the pilot for IFR flying in a Cirrus (but it does generate a significant appreciation for all the technology). The only caveat that I'd place on these statements revolves around the CFI doing the training. If your instructor does not understand the technology and all the ways it can be utilized, you will certainly not get much out of it.

The cons:

You'll have to deal with the envy of folks that had to do their instrument rating with no autopilot, no moving map, and no GPS. I had to do it that way and can confirm that it does indeed cause much undue suffering.

Commercial License

Probably the least-often completed license in Cirrus aircraft, there's equal pull in favor of doing the commercial in SR20/SR22 versus another aircraft. There are relatively few commercially trained Cirrus pilots because the PPL and IFR tickets are enough for most people.

The pros:

You'll be made to fly maneuvers that you did for your private license but to much tighter tolerances. True mastery of the aircraft and understanding of its capabilities can be gained from doing the commercial license in a Cirrus.

The cons:

The regulations require some of the training (and some of the check ride) to be done in an aircraft with retractable gear (RG). Most pilots

who do their commercial rating in their Cirrus do all the air work in their SR20/SR22 and the landings in some RG aircraft (C-172 RG, Piper Arrow, Mooney, Bonanza, etc.). The disadvantage here is having to change planes for different phases of flight.

The normal check ride procedure is to go up with the examiner in the Cirrus, do the Chandelles, Lazy Eights, Steep Turns, and other performance maneuvers; land; switch aircraft; and fly the pattern for several performance landing demonstrations. Some view this as more trouble than it's worth, particularly considering they already know how to fly, per se, and just do the whole thing in a rented RG airplane.

Incidentally, the commercial is a bit less challenging than the private or instrument rating and thus will take less time (we have seen an average of 30 hours). Further, most of the training for this license can be done solo.

My Thoughts

My position is that the more training you do in your Cirrus, the better. Some aspects of learning in this airplane do indeed take longer (most notably the PPL), but as a result the pilot has a much more solid operational base. While time in type does not have a perfectly parallel relation to safety, it certainly helps.

Immersion training is a good way to increase retention and ensure completion; therefore it's a method I'd recommend. What's more, training after the license and/or rating increases proficiency and safety ... so do it a lot. Train with someone who specializes in your kind of aircraft and who can show you all those "little things" which we know really add up to be the biggest things. 

About the Author: *John Fiscus is co-owner of The Flight Academy and has over 5,700 total hours, about 5,000 of those teaching in Cirrus aircraft. Before opening the Academy, John worked at Cirrus Design as a factory instructor and corporate pilot. He holds Commercial, CFII and CSIP ratings.*