

# The path to becoming an airline captain — how pilots climb the ranks

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Every time you get on an aircraft, you entrust your life to the captain and their crew. Airline safety has become so good that you now take it for granted. You board a flight and you expect to walk off the aircraft again a few hours later — and so you should.

However, who is this person responsible for your safety, hidden away behind the locked flight deck door? How did they get to that position and how much of the work do they do themselves and how much is shared by their flight deck colleague?

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## What’s the difference between a captain and a co-pilot?

One of my biggest bugbears about how the aviation industry is portrayed by the general media is the use of the terms “pilot” and “co-pilot”. Whilst both are valid terms when used in the correct context, more often than not they are used incorrectly. Let’s clear this up.

Too often I hear on the news that “the pilot” successfully landed the aircraft after an inflight emergency. Unless the aircraft is a small propellor aircraft, it’s most likely that there are two pilots onboard the aircraft. On longer flights, there will be three pilots and on

some of the ultra-long-range flights, four pilots. The safe outcome of a flight is down to all of the pilots who are present in the flight deck, not just one single pilot.



The co-pilot is equally as trained and proficient as the captain. (Photo by MICHAEL BUHOLZER/AFP/Getty Images)

The term “co-pilot” is often misused, too. He or she is quite often portrayed as an idle observer in the flight deck whilst the heroic captain saves the day. Or, in the case of accident recreations, a passive and timid individual, afraid to speak up against the overbearing captain.

The clue is in the title “co-pilot” — the “co” means “joint” or “together”. The co-pilot is as proficient in flying the aircraft and equally trained as the captain. The only difference is that most airlines have wind and visibility limitations when the co-pilot is flying the aircraft.

On a day-to-day basis, the captain and co-pilot will take it in turns to fly the aircraft. The co-pilot may do the first sector, performing the takeoff, climb, cruise, approach and landing, with the captain doing the flying on the return sector.

Whilst it's quite clear who the term captain is referring to, "co-pilot" is a little bit vaguer, possibly leading to the general confusion about the title. Whilst there is only one rank for captains, there can be three ranks for co-pilots, hence the broad usage of the name.

## Pilot ranks

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Whilst all airlines will have much the same definition for a captain, how the ranks and roles are classified below can be somewhat different. Here is how most airlines classify their pilots.

### Captain

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The commander of the aircraft and normally the most experienced pilot in the flight deck. The captain sits in the left-hand seat and has the overall responsibility of the aircraft and its occupants.

Depending on the airline, they will normally have at least 3,000 hours of flying experience. A captain wears four stripes on their uniform shirts and jackets.

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The captain has four stripes on their uniform. (Photo by Yasuyoshi Chiba/Getty Images)

### Senior first officer

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An SFO is one of the ranks of “co-pilot” and sits in the right-hand seat. A senior first officer tends to have at least 1,500 hours total flying experience, however, this varies from airline to airline. The SFO is second in command of the aircraft after the captain. Should the captain become incapacitated for any reason, the SFO takes command of the aircraft.

Some airlines will make a new entrant pilot a senior first officer if they have the required experience from their previous airline. Other airlines will make them wait a little longer. A senior first officer wears three stripes on their uniform shirt and jacket.

## First officer

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Another rank of “co-pilot”, a first officer wears two stripes on their uniform and tends to have less experience than a senior first officer, however, this is not always the case. Some airlines give all new pilots the rank of first officer for the first four to five years in the company, irrespective of their previous experience.

As a result, a two-stripe pilot could have thousands of hours of experience as a captain at their old airline or be fresh out of flight school. The lesson here is don't judge a pilot's experience by their stripes.

## Second officer

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Second officers are employed by some airlines to act as “cruise” pilots. This means that they only sit at the controls during the cruise, allowing the captain and the SFO/FO to sleep so that they are well rested for landing.

## Seniority

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For most jobs in the commercial world, people tend to “climb the corporate ladder” by moving from one company to another and then onto another. They gain experience in one job and apply for a more senior role in a new company. This jumping often carries on throughout their careers.

Alternatively, if moving up internally within a company, they try and set themselves apart from their colleagues by doing more to catch the eye of their boss. Excel in the role and gain the promotion.

However, in aviation, things are quite different.

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Promotions in the aviation world work quite differently to those in the business world. (Photo by FangXiaNuo/Getty Images)

Most airlines operate a seniority system for pilots. When you join the company, you start at the bottom of the list. As pilots retire off the top, you move up that list. Depending on the airline, your position on the seniority list can have a major effect on your work/life balance.

Some airlines use seniority for everything from leave allocation and working over holiday seasons to determining which aircraft you fly to which destinations. For the airlines where seniority is a major factor, life at the bottom of the list can be quite different from life at the top.

Seniority is also used to determine when you become a captain and it's this fact that surprises people most when they hear it. "Surely the best pilots should be a captain sooner, irrespective of how long they've been in the airline?" A fair analysis for most jobs, but not necessarily in commercial aviation.

As mentioned above, in "normal" jobs, people do what they can to set themselves apart from their colleagues in order to move up the corporate ladder. Making more sales, or coming up with better ideas than others will help you gain promotions.

However, over the history of aviation, pilots trying to be clever or doing things differently often resulted in accidents. Make a mistake in a corporate job, you lose money. Make a mistake as a pilot, you lose lives.

As a result, airline pilots are encouraged not to be clever. Not to stand out from the crowd. You may think that this leads to mediocrity and to a certain sense it does. However, mediocrity is relative.

Every six months, all pilots must undergo recurrent training in a flight simulator to be tested and trained on normal and emergency procedures. Whilst there is a minimum required standard of performance determined by the airline's governing agency, better airlines will set their own bar for what they deem acceptable performance from their pilots.



Pilots are tested every six months in a flight simulator. (Photo by Emily McNutt/The Points Guy)

Even if a pilot meets the regulator's standards, if they don't meet the airline's own standards, they will fail the check and will not be allowed to fly passengers again until they have retaken the test and passed.

However, if the pilot meets the standard required by the airline, they pass the check and continue to fly passengers as normal. Therefore, it could be argued that this does not breed

a form of mediocrity, but instead results in a consistently high standard of operation for all the pilots in the airline.

As the years go by and a pilot continues to meet the standard required by the airline in all their simulator checks, they are demonstrating that they have the skills and aptitude to become a captain when their time comes.

## Becoming a captain

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Captain positions become available for two reasons. Firstly, when a captain retires off the top of the list, someone is needed to fill that slot. Also, when an airline is expanding, more pilots are needed to fly the additional aircraft, so more captain positions become available.

For the majority of the world's airlines, these promotions come from within. Senior first officers who have been with the airline for a number of years have their loyalty rewarded by being promoted to captain. This is done in seniority order.

However, this isn't the only way to become a captain.

## Direct entry captains

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There are certain scenarios where a pilot may be able to join a new airline directly as a captain. These are known as direct entry captains (DECs). This normally only happens at new airlines in a rapidly developing market where there are not enough experienced co-pilots to upgrade to captain.

As a result, the airline will normally look to employ pilots with previous command experience straight in as a captain. However, this type of recruitment has its pros and cons.

It benefits the airline as they are able to continue their rapid growth by filling the left-hand seat of their aircraft with experienced captains. It also benefits the individual as they are able to take advantage of the lack of supply by making a quick buck.

However, if this trend continues and co-pilots are passed over for command, it can breed a sense of resentment amongst the co-pilot community. Bear in mind that a DEC may have to fly with one of these co-pilots and it's easy to see how an unhealthy atmosphere may develop in a safety-critical environment.

## The command course

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Whilst every flight and simulator check as a co-pilot is focused on developing skills to become a captain, all candidates must still complete the command course.

Considered the most gruelling part of a pilot's career, the command course requires

months of study and preparation to ensure that the pilot is up to speed with all aspects of the job. Manual flying skills are only a small part of flying an airliner, the majority of the skills required fall into the management category.

Developing leadership skills is key. The captain is expected to lead by example with safety the basis of every decision they make, but at the same time being aware of the commercial implications of these choices. Balancing safety with commercial pressure is the conundrum that the captain must solve every time they put on their uniform.

Setting the right atmosphere in the flight deck with the other pilots is also a key skill to being a good captain. A crew works best when all members feel that they are valued and that their contributions are welcome. It's not a case of giving everyone a nice warm fuzzy feeling, it's about empowering crew members to speak up in the interests of safety.

All too often in the history of commercial aviation, accidents have occurred because a subordinate co-pilot felt unable to speak up against an overbearing captain. Infuriatingly, these kinds of accidents are still occurring in certain parts of the world, even though it's a well-known phenomenon.

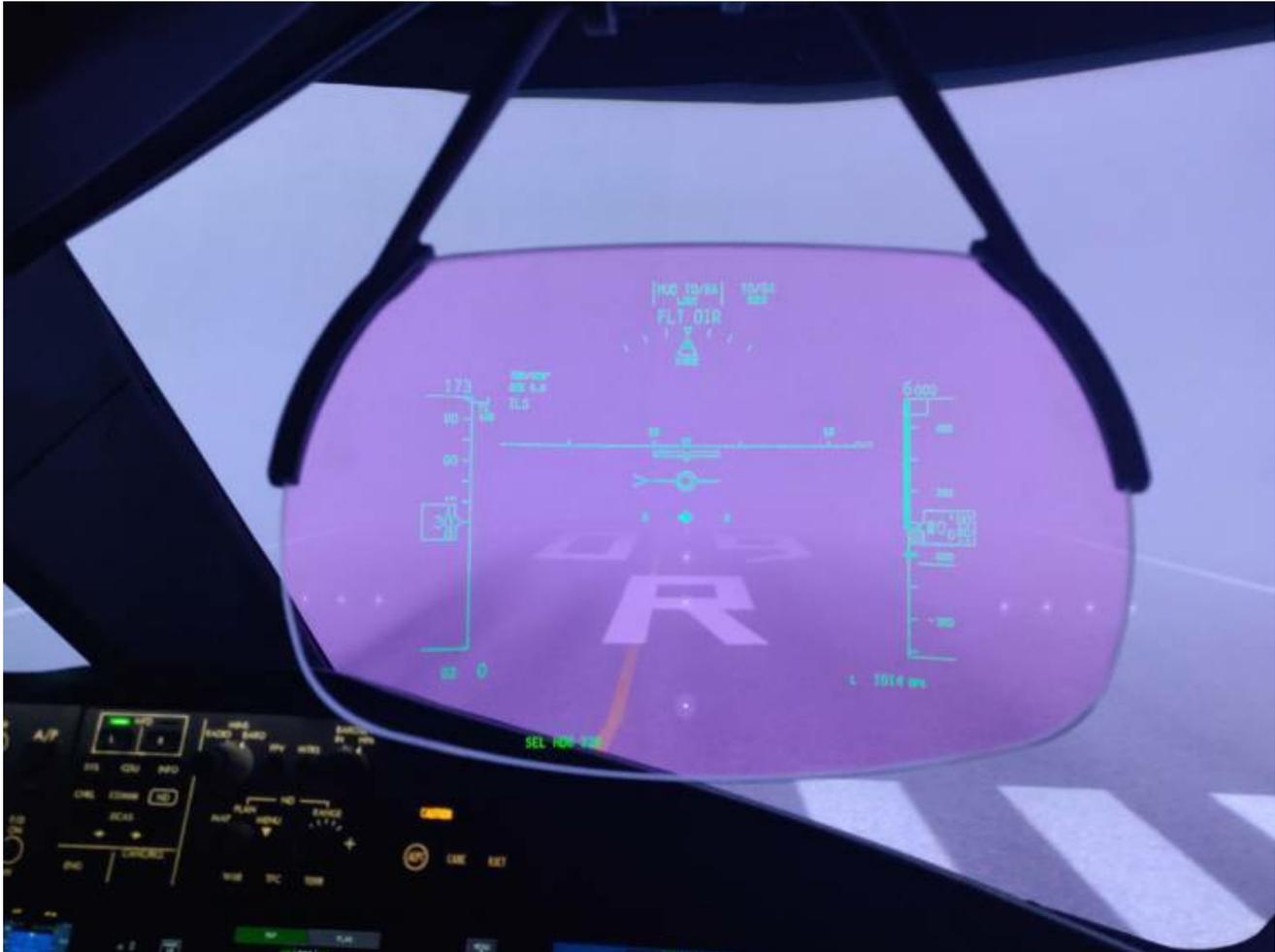
## “Captains only” weather

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The command course also gives the candidate the opportunity to practice flying in “captains only” weather conditions such as strong winds and low visibility.

All aircraft types have a crosswind limit determined by the manufacturer. As a result, most airlines only allow co-pilots to takeoff or land the aircraft when the conditions are up to two-thirds of the aircraft limit. Anything beyond this, the captain must fly the aircraft. It's the same for low visibility operations. When fog sets in and an autoland is required, it is the captain who must be in control.

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In foggy conditions, the captain must do the takeoff and landing. (Photo by Charlie Page/The Points Guy)

Emergency handling is also a key part of the course. Up until this point, candidates will have had the practice of running their own “sector” during previous simulator checks, making the decisions as if they were the captain. The command course focuses on this skill and perfects it.

To make these situations more realistic, the instructor will create a realistic scenario, for example, mid-Atlantic at 4 a.m. Everything is normal, the flight is progressing as planned until all of a sudden a warning alarm goes off. There’s been a loss of cabin pressurisation.

The drill for a rapid descent is well practised, but what happens after the descent is complete? Where do you divert to? How much fuel do you need to get there? Is the weather good enough? A good captain will already have these answers even before the emergency event has occurred.

However, what would you do if the cabin crew then call to say that a passenger has had a heart attack triggered by the stress of the emergency descent? Without urgent medical assistance, they could die. Do you risk landing at the nearest airport with the marginal weather to save this person’s life but risking the others, or do you divert to the safer option

but risk losing the heart attack patient?

It's a question of prioritising tasks and balancing risk versus reward, set against a backdrop of time available limited by your fuel endurance and all hampered by tiredness.

## Bottom line

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Ultimately, captains are responsible for everything and everyone on board an aircraft. Should they need to do so, they have the authority to break the rules in the interest of safety, if they deem that a situation warrants it.

An airline pilot is a risk manager and the final decision lies with the captain. Not only do they need the flying skills to handle the aircraft in the most demanding of weather conditions, but they also need the ability to make clear and concise decisions, often under extreme pressure.

The path to becoming a captain take years. However, all it takes is a setback in the global economy and that dream can go up in smoke in an instant.

*Featured photo by Alberto Riva/The Points Guy.*