

How to Copy an IFR Clearance Like a Pro

The task that befuddles most instrument pilots in training doesn't involve flying at all!

Prior to taxi, and sometimes prior to engine start, we need to copy and read back an IFR clearance. This is generally the most complicated set of instructions issued by Air Traffic Control throughout the whole flight, and it usually comes fast enough to make any pilot's head spin! But if you know what to listen for, you can copy even the most confusing clearances like a pro.

First, we need to take care of some preliminaries. Unless you are lightning fast with a pen, you've got to develop your own shorthand for the ATC lingo found in most clearances. Remember, some controllers put the MicroMachine man to shame on the radio. So why write out "fly runway heading" when you can just write RH? Below is a table of symbols I use for common instructions.

ATC Phrase	Shorthand / Symbol
<i>Clear</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>Fly Runway Heading</i>	<i>RH</i>
<i>Turn Right/Left Heading #</i>	<i>← 330 or → 030</i>
<i>Climb and Maintain 3,000 Feet</i>	<i>↑ 3</i>

There is no rule for ATC shorthand. Use whatever system makes sense to you, and change it as needed. Just make sure you can read it afterwards!

Be Prepared

When you make the initial call to pick up an IFR clearance, you have to be ready for it. Like I said, some controllers will read your clearance fast, so make sure you have a good pen and a piece of paper ready before keying the microphone.

Know the Format

In almost all cases, IFR clearances are issued in the same order. This makes readback habitual (*easy*) once you get the hang of it. For this reason, a lot of CFI's teach the CRAFT acronym.

It's easy to use, just write CRAFT on your kneeboard vertically and copy your clearance in the order given:

Clearance Fix (usually the destination airport)

Route (typically "AF" for as-filed)

Altitude

Frequency (departure frequency to call once airborne)

Transponder

Putting it All Together

Suppose you receive the following clearance:

“Cessna 12345 cleared to Nashville as filed, fly runway heading, climb and maintain three thousand, expect seven thousand one zero minutes after departure, departure frequency one two four point six five, squawk two seven one three.”

Your kneeboard should look something like this:

C BNA
R AF RH
A ↑3 7 10
F 124.65
T 2713

Practice Makes Perfect

As I said, these clearances come fast and it takes some time getting used to the format. Luckily, there is a resource for web-savvy pilots to gain some practice. Visit LiveATC.net, a website that streams live air traffic control audio from major airports over the web. Try listening to [Boston clearance delivery](#) with a paper and pencil. Copy and mentally read back clearances as they come and compare your response to that of other pilots! It's a great way to gain months of free experience for just a few hours at home.

If you're still having trouble, don't be discouraged. Clearances are a common bump in the road for most pilots: it will all come to you with a little time and patience.