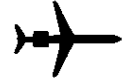


# Distractions

by Jerry E. Tobias



Many aviation accidents and incidents occur every year as a result of distractions. Somehow, the person or persons involved allowed something, someone, or some event to *divert their attention* from the primary task at hand, occasionally with tragic results.

Even when disaster does not follow a distraction, results that are less than the desired outcome often do. The following actual quotes from NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) help illustrate my point:

"I got centered on the taxiway. There was plenty of room to taxi in front of a parked aircraft that was on the right of the taxiway. *I got distracted* from my taxiing duties and began an internal instrument scan and other checklist-related items. I did not notice the airplane drift to the right. When I looked up I... hit the brakes too late. My right wingtip hit the nose cone of the other aircraft."

"As I flared for landing, I heard a loud scraping sound and realized I had not dropped the gear. I added full power for a go-around. After landing I saw that the tips of the props were bent. *Contributing factors*: Two children talking to me on final; argument with ex-wife before takeoff; possible loss of job the next day; did not use a checklist on landing..."

We are all aware that distractions are common and frequent occurrences. How, then, do we attack this problem? The first step involves understanding just what distractions are and why they pose such a threat to aviation safety.

The dictionary definition of a distraction is something that "*diverts attention from the primary task by drawing or directing one's focus to a different object or in different directions at the same time.*" Some designed distractions, of course, are actually very beneficial. Alerting systems in cockpits and automobile brake lights are two good examples. Their purpose is to divert our attention to information that we need to be aware of, and their value, therefore, is tremendous. The distractions that we must be concerned about, however, are the unplanned-but-regular disruptions that negatively impact our performance.

"*Diverts attention from the primary task*" is the key phrase in that definition. It seems that we humans have difficulty being "attentive" to more than one thing at a time. If you doubt that, when was the last time that you able to read the newspaper *and* have a substantive conversation with your spouse at the same time? Without getting into marriage counseling, let me just remind you that you can do one or the other...but not both. It's your choice.

One other major distraction issue is the fact that *once your attention is interrupted, it is not automatically "spring-loaded" back to its previous target.* Let me explain.

Think about the number of times during your lifetime - or, even during the last year - that you've had no idea of what you were just about to say. Or, what about all of those times that you've had absolutely no idea of why you just made a trip across the room or down to the basement? In each of these or any similar scenarios, something or someone interrupted your thinking process. That's not unusual. The problem is that *your mind did not go back to what you were processing before you were distracted or interrupted.* Instead, your mind went from thought "A" to thought "B," then on to thought "C" - but it did not automatically spring back to thought "A".

This same dangerous pattern occurs, of course, in the work place. How many times, for example, have you started to laterally balance aircraft wing fuel, been interrupted by a radio call from ATC or something else, and then had to re-balance the fuel in the other direction? Be honest! Or, how many times have you inadvertently left the seat belt sign on long after regaining a smooth ride? Or, how many times have you wandered around the hangar or shop looking for the tool that you know you put down somewhere as your mind went somewhere else? Again, the problem is that our interrupted attention does not automatically return to previous thoughts or tasks.

What can we do? Two things: eliminate and manage.

The first step is to proactively *eliminate* as many distractions and interruptions from the aviation environment as possible. That might mean something as basic as not allowing yourself or your team to be unnecessarily interrupted while in the middle of a maintenance procedure or a pre- or post-flight inspection.

It also means eliminating cockpit distractions. Apply some common sense here. Be self-disciplined enough, for example, to restrict the accomplishment of non-critical tasks to non-critical times. Also, if you have passengers onboard (even just one), let them know when you are available and when you are not (passengers often think that *accessibility* means *availability* - which is not necessarily the case). And, if you are flying as a crew, make certain that the “sterile cockpit” rule (no non-pertinent conversation or tasks below 10,000’) is a *practiced* standard operating procedure.

The second important step is to *manage* the distractions and interruptions that cannot be eliminated. It is a great idea, for example, to always review any interrupted checklist to make certain that nothing was missed. Another simple-but-effective technique is to use a “memory tool” of some kind to bring your attention back to your intended target. Many pilots relocate something in the cockpit (a sun screen or other movable device) to remind themselves that - if interrupted - something is in progress that still needs their attention. Others carry a small clip with a short lanyard attached for the same purpose (the old “string around the finger” routine).

My point, of course, is that distractions and interruptions are very real impediments to safe operations, and must be proactively eliminated and/or managed whenever and however possible. Remember, *the distraction problem touches every part of aviation*. So, whether you are touring in your J-3, balancing fuel in your Boeing, or performing a maintenance function or inspection, be aware that *your attention can easily be diverted* from your intended task...and often with very undesirable consequences. So, stay alert...and stay safe! ■

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