

Press to talk

When should you talk on the radio at a non-towered aerodrome? And when should you shut up? Because “should” is such a subjective word, there will never be complete agreement among all pilots on those questions. And that even includes those of us who are always right! But as a guide, we can look at what CASA says we must do, and what they recommend we do, and then apply some uncommon sense and airmanship.

When must you talk?

According to the CASR Part 91 Manual of Standards (MOS) Chapter 21, you must broadcast on a CTAF if you consider it reasonably necessary to avoid collision. AIP ENR 9.1.4 says exactly the same thing. That’s the only CTAF call that CASA dictates you must make. So anyone who says you must make a taxiing call or an inbound call or a call joining the circuit is offering you an opinion, not a CASA-mandated rule. Even though I agree about making all of those calls and I think it’s just common sense, it’s still just an opinion.

As for calls to avoid collision, neither publication defines “reasonably necessary”, but the important point is that if you consider it reasonably necessary to talk to someone to avoid a risk of collision, you’re going to talk. You don’t need a rule to tell you to do it when survival instinct is a perfectly good motivator.

When should you talk?

While CASA doesn’t say “must” regarding any CTAF call other than the one above, AIP ENR 1.1-9 has a table listing “Recommended calls in all circumstances.” These are the ones that CASA recommends even if there’s no one else on the frequency (and you can never be sure of that anyway.) Those calls are:

- Taxiing;
- Inbound;
- Overflying.

Regarding the inbound and overflying calls, CASA says to make them at 10 nm, depending on aeroplane performance and pilot workload. So if an ex-RAAF knucklehead is flying his Mustang in at 250 knots, 10 nm is only 2½ minutes from overhead, so it would be wise for him to make his call earlier than 10 nm. If V_{NE} for your brain is only 120 knots, you might like a bit more than 2½ minutes’ warning that a classic WW2 fighter is about to chase you around the circuit.

Also, within what height above the aerodrome should you give an overflying call? If you consider that your transit overhead may affect aircraft on and around the aerodrome, make a call. So if you’re overflying Northam at 2500 ft, definitely. At 3500 – you decide. At 6500 – you’re nowhere near the circuit traffic, so why bother? If you only have one radio, you’re better off to be on area frequency. If you have two, monitor the CTAF but there’s almost certainly no need to talk on it.

The next table in AIP lists “Recommended calls dependent on traffic.” These are:

- Entering a runway;
 - Joining the circuit;
 - If doing a straight-in approach – at least 3nm from the threshold;
 - If planning to join on base.
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As long as we do what CASA says, anything extra is subjective, and again, it's a matter of whose opinion and whose version of airmanship we're talking about. So let's go with Kevin's opinion, which is influenced firstly by needing to be standardised with RACWA since our flying school operates under their AOC, and also by a few years of listening to pilots talking on CTAFs.

I teach students to do all the calls listed above. So for a standard trip out to the training area or up the road to Cunderdin or Wongan or Wylie, that typically means:

- Taxiing;
- Entering the runway;
- Inbound at 10nm;
- Joining the circuit.

In the circuit

This is the biggest source of debate. RACWA teaches students to do at least one call per circuit; they don't dictate which leg. I teach students to call on downwind for two reasons. Firstly, it's consistent with what you're required to do at Jandakot, and secondly, it's fairly early in the circuit so it gives other pilots a good chance to work out if they need to accommodate you. A pilot at the holding point will decide whether he or she has enough time to taxi out, backtrack and take off ahead of you, and a pilot doing a straight-in approach will decide whether to continue or to rethink it and join on another leg.

But if you're joining midfield crosswind, broadcasting on downwind means you're making two calls within about 15 seconds. Why? A base call in that case would be a better idea.

I also teach students to do a call turning final, which is handy for someone at the holding point or lining up. But if they've made a downwind call, and if there's no other traffic, or none that's a threat, I don't get particularly hung up about it if they miss that call. I hope Matt 1 and Matt 2 (Sewell and Barrington) don't argue too much with that last point!

So why do some pilots chatter so much?

For a short period starting in 2005, CASA decreed that pilots should broadcast on downwind, base and final at non-towered aerodromes. But even though it was only "should" and not "must", we're pilots and we love the sound of our own voices on the radio, so many pilots took up these new recommendations with relish. Suddenly circuits at non-towered aerodromes were full of people making calls on every leg. By the time CASA came to their senses and wrote what we have now, lots of instructors had taught their students to yabber on every leg of the circuit, and they in turn had become instructors and taught their students the same thing. So while Simon and Garfunkel said "Silence like a cancer grows", unfortunately so can the urge to chatter. Hence it's not at all rare to hear someone broadcast 10nm out, then at 3 or 5nm, then descending on the dead side, then joining the circuit, then on downwind, base and final. By the time I've heard that much yabbering from a pilot, I'm usually thinking "Shut up and fly the aeroplane!"

So do one or two calls in the circuit, depending on what you see as necessary or what you prefer. Neither is right or wrong. But calling on every leg is generally pointless. If the circuit is quiet, why call on every leg, unless it's to hear the sound of your own voice? And if it's busy, calls on every leg just clutter up the frequency. Use your discretion, talk if you need to, and don't prioritise Communicate over Aviate and Navigate.

Format of calls

There are standard formats for very call, but if you don't put everything in exactly the same order as the next pilot, it's generally no great drama provided you say everything you need to. Who am I, where am I, what are my intentions? Have you included all you need to? For instance, when broadcasting inbound, "10 miles east" is not a position because you haven't included your altitude. "10 miles east, 2500" is a position. By the way, who needs to say "nautical"? There's only one kind of mile in aviation.

The first and last words of a CTAF broadcast should be the name of the aerodrome. "Northam traffic" says to other pilots that there's a call starting, so be quiet and listen. "Northam" at the end says the call has finished, and it's someone else's turn to talk. "Northam traffic" at the end just confuses those two aims. Incidentally, quite a few pilots repeat their callsign at the end: "Northam traffic, Cessna 172 RWT, 10 miles south, 3500, inbound, RWT Northam." No need to, but it's not a bad idea as it helps the pilot who missed your callsign first time and wants to write it down.

You do not need to make a call "descending on the dead side." That is such a superfluous call that there's not even a format for it in the AIP or the RACWA Student Pilot Guide. You're about to make a call joining the circuit, so just fly the aeroplane and set up your circuit entry.

And if you go round and want to broadcast the fact, it's critical to fly the aeroplane first. Get a positive rate of climb going, clean the aeroplane up, move to the dead side, then decide whether you need to make that call.

Also, on the topic of formats, if you're talking to another pilot to establish where they are and to make sure you don't fly into the exact same piece of airspace at the exact same time, standard published format calls are good, but if you're not sure exactly what to say, just speak plain English. That's much better than a midair!

New instructor

We now have another instructor. Ray Challen is coming on board and will be available on a casual basis. He's sent us a brief bio:

Ray is an enthusiastic recreational pilot, being a part owner of a Cessna 182 and a Van's RV14A which can often be seen on Flightradar enroute between Jandakot and his weekend retreat near Bremer Bay. He has reached a stage of life commonly referred to as "semi-retired" and instructs on a casual basis for the enjoyment of introducing people to the challenges and rewards of learning to fly and then flying for recreation or progressing to a CPL. Ray is a casual instructor (and currently President) at the Royal Aero Club at Jandakot.

New pilot

Matt Barrington, after passing his RPL test in August, finally received his licence and recently took a slightly nervous dad as his first passenger.
