



'MAINTAIN VFR'

Two recent Training Tips discussed cloud cover . Those ["Cloud Tops"](#) and ["What's the ceiling?"](#)(clouds in the distance off your wing tip must be given wide berth, too. One day you might receive a clearance to enter or depart controlled airspace accompanied by the cautionary instruction, "Maintain VFR at all times." Why did the controller say that?



The caution was meant to remind you that you, as the pilot, should never let a radar vector or other instruction get you in trouble. "In many cases, particularly at radar facilities, the people on the ground have little idea of the flight conditions beyond what has been relayed by pilots," wrote Bruce Landsberg, executive director of the AOPA Air Safety Foundation, in the safety article ["Just say 'unable.'"](#) This isn't a concern only for instrument pilots trying to comply with instructions while avoiding turbulence or icy clouds. "A similar situation involving benign clouds can develop with a VFR pilot operating in Class B or C airspace. Pilots not on an IFR flight plan are expected to maintain VFR—period. If an assigned heading or altitude is going to put the airplane too close to a cloud, then advise the controller that you are 'unable to maintain VFR' and suggest an alternative heading or altitude."

Some experience flying nearer than is comfortable to clouds, in the company of your instructor, will eliminate any skepticism you may have about the importance of this responsibility. In his "Wx Watch" column in the [November 2006 AOPA Pilot](#), Thomas A. Horne argues that gradual exposure to poorer weather conditions should be included in any comprehensive flight training. "I've always been an advocate for flight instructors taking primary students on flights in marginal VFR weather—both in the traffic pattern and away from it. This way, the student can see what a 1,000-foot ceiling and three-statute-mile visibility (the VFR weather minimums at airports with controlled airspace designated to the surface) looks like. The same goes for flights at altitude, flying in three-mile visibility! s and trying to keep the prescribed distance from clouds. The student quickly learns that three miles isn't much visibility at all."

Even when there's no controller reminding you to maintain VFR, remember those wise words. They'll keep you safe!