

Don't you just love it when you are reading or concentrating on an important project and someone says to you, "I don't mean to interrupt, but . . ." which, by its very nature is an intentional interruption. I mean, if you are going to interrupt my concentration, I'd prefer you to say, "Excuse me," and then say what you have to say. Let's face it, when you started to talk to me, you absolutely intended to interrupt.

But not all interruptions are intentional. Accidental interruptions happen all the time on the aircraft radio. Here's an example:

"Los Angeles Center, Diamond Jet one two four Zulu Romeo, passing one two thousand for flight level two three zero."

"One two four five five, KingAir seven eight Victor."

What happen there? The pilot of the Diamond Jet just switched over to Los Angeles Center, paused for a moment to listen, heard nothing and checked in. Just a second before the Diamond Jet switched on to the frequency, Los Angeles Center had given the KingAir a frequency change. So, Diamond Jet Four Zulu Romeo accidentally interrupted the conversation.

Here's another example:

"Cleveland Center, Airliner Six Fifty-Seven, one six thousand."

"And Twin Cessna two two Lima, you're now cleared to Dayton via direct Mansfield, Victor 8, Briggs, direct. Maintain seven thousand."

Another interruption, because the pilot of the Twin Cessna had advised Cleveland Center he was ready to copy a reroute clearance just a second before the pilot of the airliner checked on the frequency.

Are these interruptions a big deal? Not really. Some controllers get pretty frustrated with them, especially if the frequency is very busy. I've heard this more than once from a frustrated controller:

"Alright, everybody stop calling me. I'll call you when I need you." I understand the guy's frustration, but, like those times when you really need to go to bathroom, sometimes you just gotta speak up or risk making a big mess.

At peak departures times in Atlanta, the world's busiest airport, I've heard this from an exasperated controller: "You guys are stepping all over each other, and as long as you don't wait your turn, nobody is going anywhere." Again, I understand her frustration, but this is one of the most stupid comments I've ever heard from an air traffic controller, and sadly, I've heard it more than once.

To understand why this is so stupid, you have to visualize about forty airliners spread out all over the airport, trying to taxi out to the same runway within a five-minute window around 7 pm—which is airline rush hour in Atlanta. What are we supposed to do, take a number and get in line? It reminds me of an announcement a gate agent in Chicago once made to the passengers in the boarding area:

"Today, I want you to line up for boarding in alphabetical order." It got a good laugh because the 185 passengers knew there was no way everyone was going to coordinate with everyone else to make that happen.

It's the same problem on an aircraft radio frequency. We're miles apart from each other in our separate cockpits, meaning I can't see when you are preparing to speak, and you have the same problem with me.

There is a solution, but it's not 100%. The best you can do as a pilot is to listen to the flow of conversation and wait for an opening to speak.

All radio conversations have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Radio conversations usually begin with a call sign: "Boston Center," or "Cessna Eight India Mike," for example.

The middle part of the conversation is the passing of information by one person, either a pilot or an air traffic controller to the other: "Climb and maintain five thousand."

The conversation usually ends with an acknowledgement by the other person: "Climb and maintain five thousand, Cessna Eight India Sierra."

I say the conversation usually ends this way, but sometimes it continues with a follow-up comment or question: "Climb and maintain five thousand, Cessna Eight India Sierra, and we are requesting fifteen degrees right of course to avoid a thunderstorm."

Now, we not only have to wait for ATC to acknowledge this request, but also for the pilot to read back the acknowledgement: "Cessna Eight India Sierra, deviations up to fifteen degrees right are approved. When done deviating, cleared direct Springfield."

"Cessna Eight India Sierra, up to fifteen degrees right, then direct Springfield when able."

The trick is to listen, and listen carefully for this pattern. When you are sure the radio conversation is over, you are cleared in hot with your own radio call.

I said it was not a 100% solution, because sometimes, one or both parties in a conversation have to pause to think about what they just heard, or prepare to act on what they just heard. For example, let's say just before you switched over to a new radio frequency, the air traffic controller told a pilot, "For crossing traffic, I need you to go up or down a thousand feet. Say your request." You didn't hear that sentence because you were still busy dialing in the frequency. Now you are up on the new frequency, but the pilot hasn't answered because she is taking a moment to consider when going up or down would be better for her flight. The radio frequency is currently quiet while she considers her options. You think, "It's quiet. I'll check in with the controller."

"Seattle Center, Piper Four Two Nine Golf Golf, eight thousand." There's no answer from Seattle Center, but then you hear this: "Six Three Juliet would like to go up a thousand." Where did that come from? So, you see listening for a break in the conversation is not a 100% solution, but the exceptions only come up when you are switching on to a new frequency.

My recommendation is this: When switching on to a new frequency and no one is talking, always wait for four seconds before checking in with the controller. Waiting four seconds gives both controllers and pilots adequate time to consider their response to a conversation that was already in progress and to reply. This intentional wait time is not guaranteed to work every time, but it will help.

Finally, if you do step on or into someone else's conversation, don't sweat it. Radio voice

communication is old technology. These days, even Twitter or Facebook is a more sophisticated way of conversing, where everyone gets in line to speak, and messages are automatically sorted by date and time. It's not always your fault when you interrupt, even if a frustrated controller might tell you it is. They are working with 1930's technology too.

On the other hand, if the entire aviation system upgraded to communication by datalink, I'd have nothing to talk about, unless you wanted typing lessons.

If you have any questions or comments about this audio lesson or about anything else at ATCcommunication.com, contact me by datalink at jeff@atccommunication.com, or give a call to my voicemail hotline at the number listed in the left margin of the website. Let's talk. I promise not to interrupt. I'm Jeff Kanarish. Thank you for listening. Be well and fly safe.