

Five Quality Canopy Skills Every Beginner Should Have

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By **Steven Blincoe**

So you whipped through your student program, graduated AFF, moving towards or already got your A license, eyeing a rig to buy and well on your way to your first 100 jumps. Canopy skills are an integral part of every training program, but are also the most important skills these days. There are five quality canopy skills every student should know: awareness of your rig and canopy, awareness of your self and others in the pattern, awareness of target and setup, good depth perception, and a proper two stage flare.

1. Awareness of Your Rig and Canopy

Developing awareness of your rig comes with time. Unfortunately, when you're a student time is not a comfort you always have. You need to be comfortable and confident with your rig on every jump. If it is a new rig your jumping wear it around the house and get used to it cooking dinner, sitting on the couch or doing chores. If you rent rigs then get suited up extra early like on the twenty minute call, so you can go through all your emergency procedures. This comfort and confidence is paramount when you are up in the air. If you are not confident in your equipment, you will have "gear fear" and this can affect your judgment.

If you have a new rig and there are things you don't like about the rig, change them. You would be surprised the little things a rigger can do to make a rig fit better. I recommend buying a custom rig when you have reached a size you will be on for a while 190-170 sq feet on average. Even with a new rig small alterations can be made. The easiest fixes that I see students can do is a bungee cord to connect your leg straps, padded reserve handle,

shortening the closing loop, and modifying the laterals to make the rig fit tighter. All these modifications are freefly specific but a tighter rig is a safer rig.

Know your canopy. Know each stage of deployment and the equipment on your canopy which is responsible for each stage. Learn how to pack! Packing your parachute is an intimate way to get to know your equipment. If you can pack your rig well, you will more likely have a greater understanding of your equipment and confidence with it. Packing comes with experience pack at home over and over again, watch people pack, and ask lots of questions. If a packing course is offered take it.

I know when I was starting out, I wasn't that interested in my canopy. It was a docile vehicle to get me from 3,000 feet to the ground, which I had to pack every time to go up. I definitely feel different about my canopy now. When you are under canopy and not in the pattern above 1000 feet, play with your canopy, practice your landings over and over again. Experiment with front risers, rear risers and toggles.

Two intricate tips with your equipment can improve the performance of your canopy immensely. The first is simple, stow your slider and bring it down behind your head. Keep weary of where you are located relative to the drop zone, and other jumpers. Don't mess with the slider so long you end up in another county. Stowing your slider helps reduce drag and can increase your glide. It also gets rid of that annoying flapping noise.

The second tip is for a student who can land on his target consistently. After your slider is stowed elongate your chest strap all the way out, without undoing it. Practice on the ground. You want your chest strap to be as wide as possible for three reasons: the canopy is designed to fly like this it increases the glide of your canopy, second it gives you another control surface to fly that being your hips, and lastly it allows you to lean forward in your harness which gives you more control. All three of these points can be seen on a good canopy pilot and a moderate student can start practicing these skills early on in his career, even though it will play a bigger part later.

When your chest strap is elongated your hips are now hooked directly to your canopy instead of your shoulders through the harness. It will be hard to turn the canopy with your hips at first especially with large canopies, but it can be done. Simply scissor your legs and throw the leading leg over the trailing leg and lean in to it. Then try it the other way. This will become more important when you get to sizes like 150 sq feet and below.

A word of caution, don't spend too much time elongating your chest strap under canopy, you definitely will end up in a different county. Opening shock makes it more difficult to elongate the chest strap than on the ground. The buckles cinch up with opening shock to make sure you don't fall out. Do not undo your chest strap! If you elongate the chest strap properly you will not fall out of the harness. The canopy will feel slightly wilier but nothing dangerous. Stow your slider and elongate your chest strap before you unstow the brakes. This will make it infinitely easier. If you unstowed your brakes already, let the alterations go and remember to do these things on the next jump. You must have a certified instructor watch over you when you practice on the ground and in the air. Make sure these alterations are done before 1000-1500 ft. Be careful, use common sense.

2. Awareness of Your Self and Others

I have briefly touched on this subject already, but since canopy collisions and landing off are a reality, awareness of yourself and others is a Quality Skill unto it self. Always know where you are relative to the drop zone. Are you up wind or downwind? Can't tell, figure it out! Watch the wind on the trees, or a nearby lake. Watch other skydivers, are they landing in the same direction your facing, or the opposite.

I tell my students to watch the drop zone in the plane and where you are relative to it and the wind. This serves multiple purposes: you gain an awareness of where the pilot is in his jump run and his tendencies, you have a better understanding of the area you are jumping and potential outs and hazards, and on jump run you will be able to anticipate where you will be if you look out the

window while other people are getting out.

Look out for other people under canopy, especially during and right after opening. Check your canopy then look for others immediately. Look up and down jump run for the people who got out before you and right after you. Get a visual then go through your checklists of things to do. If you are playing with your canopy up high always look before you turn or yank on a control surface. Find the pattern; be mindful of people outside the pattern. Do not spiral in the pattern. The best way to have clear space around you is to go last and deploy high.

One easy thing that you can do especially when you are traveling to a different drop zone is find how they operate their pattern. You would be surprised how many experienced jumpers do not ask about or forget the pattern. I think this is the biggest problem at destination DZs where people are visiting. Follow the rules laid out; the rules are there for your safety and the safety of others.

3. Awareness of Your Target and Setup

You should be aware of where your landing target is in freefall. I have left countless jumps early because the spot was off, people took too long in the door and spread the spot too thin, or the wind was stronger when we exited than when we took off. The point is develop an awareness of where your target is in freefall by doing solos. Don't be afraid to deploy a little early if you see you are entirely too long to get back.

After you are open and you have made sure the canopy is safe, you have made your control checks and alterations, size up the distance and altitude you have from your target. Execute the pattern your instructor and you have gone over. Try to stay upwind of your target before you start to execute your pattern. Go over in your head, how you are going to execute, see the legs of your pattern, check for others, and then go!

Hitting your target is not done in the last 150 feet, that is how people get hurt. Hitting your target comes from proper briefing of the landing area before the jump, your spot, and how you set up

for your pattern at 1000 feet. Good target acquisition comes from practice but also preparation.

4. Good Depth Perception

Depth perception is a key element of being a good canopy pilot. It is a learned skill but can be greatly improved through various techniques. If you wear glasses please tell your instructor. Do not be ashamed of your sight. Your sight will put you at a great disadvantage if you do not use your glasses or contacts. With proper use of glasses and contacts you can enjoy the sport with no problems. If your goggles don't fit your glasses buy ones that do. If you do not like glasses and your contacts dry up, change your goggles to a snugger fit, or possibly look into laser surgery. I know many people in the sport who swear by laser surgery. The bottom line when you skydive, use what you use to drive your car. Skydiving is as critical as getting behind the wheel with your eye sight.

If your sight isn't a problem or you use one of the corrective measures above, you can dramatically increase your depth perception of the drop zone and the ground. Look at the drop zone while you are in the plane and gage it with your altimeter so you get an idea of how high you are. Get a highly visible altimeter and don't forget it on the ground! When you get within the last 150 feet do a quick check for people around you, then lock in on your target. When you get 50 feet from your target, shift your eye sight from looking down to looking in front of you. Open your vision so you still include the ground but try to look forward. Begin your two stage flare at about 10-15 feet depending on the winds. Keep your vision open and wide; do not fixate on the target. Consult your instructor.

5. A Proper Two Stage Flare

I know some drop zones do not condone a two stage flare. Do not buck the trend on this one. If your drop zone doesn't allow it, come to me I will teach you. Ask your instructor about the two stage flare. I know from my experience some students have a tough enough time doing a symmetrical flare at the proper

altitude. So maybe the two stage flare is not right for you, right now. I do believe it is an important part of being a good canopy pilot, and mixed with all the alterations mentioned above can give you your first swoops coming straight in with no riser input. In fact I have seen students who collapse and stow their slider, elongate their chest strap, and use a proper two stage flare swoop 50-60 feet with no wind.

The two stage flare is quite simple. 10-15 feet above the ground quarter flare your canopy. This action planes out your canopy and translates your vertical motion forward. Make sure that the flare is quartered not a half flare. There is a dramatic difference. A quarter flare will plane the canopy out and accelerate you forward; a half flare will distort your canopy and make you sink. When you are five feet above the ground, full flare to come to a complete stop. I see many people just leave the canopy in a quarter or half flare. This action makes you hit the ground moving forward and a little hard, you might have to run it out.

Make sure you have a consistent symmetrical flare on target before you practice a two stage flare. The two stage flare is difficult without video to show you what you are doing. So, get coaching with video, people just telling you what to do will not get it done. You must have feedback and video is the best for this. Also if your instructor uses radio this is a plus, but not essential.

I have commented on many things in this article. Do not try to do them all at once. Concentrate on one thing per jump. Focus on one thing for 20 jumps, if you get flustered easily, till you get it right and it becomes habit.

If you incorporate all these things with the oversight of a quality coach, you can swoop coming straight in with no riser input on target safely negotiating others and the physical hazards around you. Be very careful under canopy. Nothing replaces common sense, good judgment and asking lots of questions. You too can be an excellent canopy pilot with these five quality skills.

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wind tunnel. He is the founder of the New School Flight University in Orlando, Florida. He also has 10 years of experience in the sport coaching, competing, and filming. Steven Blincoe can be reached by phone 530-412-2078 USA, or by email info@blincoe.org. You can also go to www.blincoe.org.