

Dream Jobs: Airline pilot

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Word Count **1,553**

Level **MAX**



Captain Karen Stahl flies planes for United Airlines. She is pictured here in the cockpit of a plane, ready for flight! Photo from: Karen Stahl.

Karen Stahl is a captain at United Airlines. She flies Boeing 767 and 757 commercial airplanes all over the world for work. Captain Stahl lives in Sunnyvale, California. She first started flying in 1986, and was hired as a pilot for United Airlines in 1995. Her favorite plane to fly is the 767, and her two favorite places to fly are Paris and Hawaii.

Newsela asked Captain Stahl a few questions about her work.

What is an ordinary day like for you?

As a pilot, your flight starts way before you get in the plane. The pilots actually meet in operations an hour or more before the flight. If the flight is domestic, it's usually two pilots. If it's international, we have one to two extra pilots as well. We take turns for rest breaks because international flights are so long. On the typical flight, we'll meet beforehand and discuss our flight plan. We used to carry big, fat bags full of thick manuals around, but now the information is all on an iPad, which is pretty amazing! On the iPad we have all of our manuals for the aircraft, and our rules and procedures. We also have information about the weather, the plane we're going to fly that day and the route.

We learn if something is broken on the plane that the mechanics are working on, or if they've determined that it's legal for us to postpone the repair because it's a minor problem. We look at all of that before we go out to the airplane. Then, we get to the plane and we split up. The co-pilot will walk around the outside of the plane to check things out. We set up the computer and get everything ready for the flight. We get our clearance from air traffic control, and we talk to the flight attendants. We brief them about what we're expecting on the flight, if it's going to be bumpy, or if there are any maintenance issues or security issues.

Then we get all ready to push back. The ramp personnel hook us up to a tug underneath the plane, and they push us back, and then we taxi out to the runway for takeoff. And then we fly to wherever we're going and we do the reverse. We come taxi-ing back in and pull up to the gate. Then, we stay in the hotel wherever we've landed. We get a good night's rest for the next day and the next flight.

What type of training do you need to become a pilot?

There are two paths. One is the military. The other is the civilian path, where you get your flight hours outside of the military. In the old days, the airlines would mostly hire military pilots. Now, the majority of pilots that are hired are civilian pilots because the military is not pumping out as many pilots as it used to. I can't speak too much to military training, but the process is somewhat similar. You start out on small planes, and then you move up to bigger planes. You are getting licenses and ratings throughout the flight training process. Each time you get a license or a rating, you do a ground school, you go fly and train in an airplane, and then you do an exam in the plane and on the ground.

Every time we switch planes or move positions, we take tests. I was a flight instructor and then worked for the commuters, which are small, regional airlines. Then I was a flight engineer. We don't have flight engineers anymore because more things are automated on the plane.

Almost all the pilots at the major airlines have a college degree. The airlines do not care about what you study, but they want to see that you've stuck with college, finished it and come out on the other side.

Do pilots get to take breaks when they're up in the air?

How many breaks we take depends on the flight time and the time of day. If you're flying to a faraway place, like India or China, you're going to have more pilots than if you're flying a shorter distance, like from New York to London.

If you have four pilots, then you divide the flight time in two and take a long break. If there are three pilots, you divide it in thirds.

What is your favorite part of the job?

The people I work with. I have a lot of great co-workers and I really enjoy that part of my job. While in flight, you're locked in a very small space for many hours on end, so it's important to work well with other people. That's one interesting thing about how pilots are hired. Early on, I think, it was more technical hiring. The airlines would lean more toward engineer types. Now, new hires have to have good people skills. When you get to a certain level, pilots are good at the technical part of the job, but people skills are really important too because we need to work well as a team.

I also love traveling and my whole family does, too. My kids have become travel fans because they traveled a lot with my husband and me. One of my favorite things is traveling when I'm not working and using the flight benefits to go to interesting places. But my job is very enjoyable. I have a beautiful office view!

Have you ever been in an emergency situation where you had to keep your wits about you?

Yes, but that is where the flight training comes in. United Airlines has amazing flight training. We go in these incredible simulators every year to make sure we stay sharp and on top of our game. In that simulator, they throw all kinds of different scenarios at the pilot. They expose us to equipment failures, terrible weather, engines failing right on takeoff and other emergency scenarios. We do these again and again and the simulators are so realistic that you definitely feel like this is happening right now. Your senses are heightened and you're reacting as if it were real. So when things happen in real life, you kick into that mode where you think, I've seen this. We get out the checklist, go through our procedures and talk to dispatch and maintenance. The training really prepares us well to handle all sorts of emergencies.

What advice would you give kids about choosing a career?

When I was growing up, I had no idea what I wanted to do. There were a lot of different things that sounded interesting. I didn't know in high school or even in early college what I wanted to do.

Quiz

- 1 Which detail from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Her favorite plane to fly is the 767, and her two favorite places to fly are Paris and Hawaii. Newsela asked Captain Stahl a few questions about her work.
 - (B) He was a captain at American Airlines, and I remember seeing that he was home a lot, he traveled, he did something interesting and he made good money.
 - (C) I was a flight instructor and then worked for the commuters, which are small, regional airlines. Then I was a flight engineer.
 - (D) It depends on the plane! Some planes have very small spaces and some have roomier flight decks. It kind of depends on the size of the plane.

- 2 Read the following detail from the article.

The main thing you need is to work hard and be tenacious.

HOW does this detail develop the CENTRAL idea of the article?

- (A) It shows that to meet any big goal you have to work hard and never give up, even if it is very difficult.
 - (B) It shows why people want to take flying lessons to become airline pilots and what skills matter most.
 - (C) It shows how becoming a pilot can be an achievable goal for anyone who is willing to work hard.
 - (D) It shows what the steps are to becoming a successful pilot if you are not in the military.
- 3 How is Karen Stahl introduced in the article?
- (A) with a detailed description of her job
 - (B) with an explanation of her career choice
 - (C) with a list of her favorite things about her job
 - (D) with a story about her stepdad's career