

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLERS IN TRAINING

HANDBOOK

What to expect.
How to prepare.
Habits that build confidence.



WELCOME TO TRAINING

Welcome to the **AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLERS IN TRAINING HANDBOOK** where you'll learn what to expect, how to prepare, and the habits that help you build confidence over time.

Training is designed to feel challenging. If it feels hard, that does not mean you are failing - it usually means you are right where you're supposed to be.

Starting ATC training can feel like stepping into a completely new world. The pace is fast, the standards are high, and there is a lot to absorb in a short amount of time. With the help of ATC instructors, the Canadian Air Traffic Control Association (CATCA) has developed this handbook to help you understand what matters, what to expect, and how to approach each phase with the right mindset.

STARTING WELL

What success really looks like

It is easy to assume the trainees who do best are the ones who seem naturally quick to learn or who sound confident right away. In practice, success usually looks quieter than that. It shows up in consistency. It shows up in effort. It shows up in people who keep coming back ready to learn, even after a rough day.

The habits that tend to matter most are the simple ones: showing up on time, staying engaged, asking questions, taking useful notes, and being open to coaching. Those things may not feel dramatic, but over the course of a program they make a real difference.

STAY CURIOUS

Ask when something does not make sense.

STAY STEADY

Focus on consistent effort, not instant perfection.

STAY COACHABLE

Use feedback as information, not as a verdict.

A helpful reminder

You do not need to know everything right away. What matters most is being consistent, engaged, and willing to improve.

COMMUNICATION STARTS NOW

ATC is a communication job, and that starts long before you are fully qualified. One of the biggest mistakes trainees make is staying quiet when they are unsure. Sometimes that happens because they do not want to interrupt. Sometimes it is because they assume they will sort it out later. Usually, that only makes the gap bigger.

Speaking up is not a sign of weakness. Asking for clarification, participating in debriefs, and talking through your thought process all help the people training you understand where you are and how to help. It also helps you build the communication habits the job itself depends on.

If you are not understanding something, speak up so you don't fall behind.

THE SMALL DAILY HABITS THAT ADD UP

There is rarely one breakthrough moment in training where everything suddenly clicks. More often, progress comes from repetition and routine. Practising phraseology out loud, reviewing yesterday's notes, sketching out airspace or flows, and keeping track of mistakes and lessons learned all help build the muscle memory and understanding that training requires.

These habits matter because training keeps moving. Courses do not really pause while you catch up. The more you stay connected to the material each day, the easier it is to build on what comes next.

Habits worth keeping

Practise phraseology out loud, review your notes daily, and keep a running record of scenarios, mistakes, and techniques that you can revisit later.

THE MINDSET THAT HELPS MOST

One of the most useful mindset shifts you can make early is letting go of the idea that you need to be perfect. ATC is a skill-based profession. Skills are built by trying, making mistakes, understanding why they happened, and adjusting. If you become too focused on avoiding errors, you can end up hesitating when you need to decide. Waiting too long in ATC is itself a mistake.

That does not mean mistakes do not matter. They do. It means mistakes are part of the learning process, especially in classroom exercises and simulation, where the goal is to build judgment before you are working live traffic. The important part is to learn from them, not repeat them out of habit.

Failure is part of the process. It is okay to make mistakes here so you can understand why something does not work.

There is another mindset shift that helps just as much: stop measuring yourself against the people around you. Training can make comparison feel unavoidable, but it is rarely useful. Some people absorb information quickly and need more time to apply it. Others are slower at first and become very steady later. What matters is whether you are improving against a standard.

Keep this in mind

You are not being ranked against the person beside you. You are being measured against a standard, and your job is to keep moving toward it.

THE TRAINING PATH

What your first experiences may feel like

YOUR FIRST WEEK

Your first week often feels like drinking from a firehose. There is a new vocabulary, a new rhythm, and a lot of information arriving quickly. You may feel like everyone else understands more than you do. Most trainees feel that way at some point.

In the first week, your job is not to master everything. It is to stay oriented. Write things down. Mark what does not make sense yet. Review material while it is still fresh. The point is to keep building a mental map of the world you are entering.

Strong trainees do not pretend they understand everything. They track what they do not understand and work on it.

YOUR FIRST SIMULATION

The first time you move from theory into simulation can feel like a jolt. Things that seemed manageable on paper suddenly happen in real time. There is more to track, more to prioritise, and more pressure to make a decision while people are watching.

That is normal. Simulation is where training starts turning knowledge into judgment. You will make mistakes there that you would never choose to make. That is okay. Think through what you are seeing, take the debrief seriously, and focus on understanding what happened rather than on protecting your pride.

Think out loud. Work ahead.

Work ahead of the aircraft when you can, and treat the debrief as part of the exercise - not as an add-on.

YOUR FIRST OJT EXPERIENCE

On-the-job training is where everything starts to feel more real. The pace may feel faster, the stakes may feel higher, and the environment is less controlled than simulation. There are also more people around you, more eyes on you, and more distractions. Even with support beside you, it is common to feel pressure rise.

The key here is not speed. It is steadiness. Use the basics you already know. Keep your scan wide. Ask questions sooner rather than later. Most of all, remember that nobody expects you to arrive fully polished. They expect you to be safe, thoughtful, and improving. Keep focused on the task at hand and avoid engaging in banter and discussions at this stage. You are there to learn ATC.

Calm beats fast

Use what you already know rather than forcing speed, especially early.

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

What to focus on in each phase

CLASSROOM

In the classroom phase, the goal is to build the foundation. That means understanding concepts rather than simply memorizing examples. Phraseology may feel like a new language at first, and some of the critical content can feel abstract before you see it in action. That is normal. Try to connect the rules to the reason behind them. If you understand why a standard exists, you will be much better prepared to apply it later.

Some trainees find it helpful to sketch layouts, map flows, or explain concepts back to someone else. The point is not to study the same way as everyone else. The point is to stay actively engaged with the material rather than passively reading it.

SIMULATION

In simulation, the goal shifts from understanding to application. This is where planning ahead, scanning consistently, and recovering from mistakes become much more important. It is also where many trainees discover that they need to let go of perfectionism. Simulation is the safest place to unpack mistakes because you can see what happened, understand why it happened, and adjust before live traffic is involved.

Try to notice patterns as you go. What caused the problem? When did the first cue appear? What would you do sooner next time? Those are the questions that turn a rough session into a useful one.

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

OJT also brings more realism and more variability. Different days, different traffic, different personalities, and different ways of handling a situation can all make the learning curve feel steeper. It can be confusing when one person shows you one technique and another person uses a different one.

In many cases, both approaches may be valid. The goal is not to find the one exact way to do the job. It is to build your own toolbox by understanding why each approach works and when to use it.

You are building a toolbox, not memorizing one way to do everything.

A FEW PATTERNS TO WATCH FOR

Some things tend to help trainees move forward. Others tend to slow them down. The difference is usually not about intelligence. It is more often about mindset and response. Trainees tend to do well when they show they are invested in their training. That can look like asking thoughtful questions, taking notes they actually use, staying engaged, and responding to feedback without becoming defensive. On the other hand, shutting down, reacting emotionally, or appearing disengaged can make training harder than it needs to be.

How you respond on a rough day matters. Keep in mind that no one glides through training without challenges. Everyone has rough days. The goal is not to avoid them. It is to recover, learn, and come back ready the next time.

Simple cues

Green flags include curiosity, preparation, note taking, clear communication, and openness to feedback. Red flags include defensiveness, excuses, poor communication, and lack of visible effort.

TAKE CARE OF THE PERSON DOING THE TRAINING

ATC training is mentally demanding, and at times it can be physically draining too. Fatigue, stress, life events, and distractions all show up in performance. That does not mean life has to be perfectly calm for you to succeed, but it does mean you need to take care of yourself as seriously as you take the material. One of the simplest but most important habits you can build early is showing up each day prepared, rested, and fit for duty. Looking after yourself is part of the training. Building that awareness now will serve you well throughout your career, where showing up fit for duty is both a professional expectation and a responsibility.

Sleep, hydration, food, and recovery are part of readiness. Training is also easier to sustain when you keep perspective. A difficult day is a difficult day. It is not your identity. Separate your performance in one session from who you are overall.

You cannot underestimate the mental and physical toll. Staying consistent and looking after yourself is part of why you get through it.

PEOPLE MATTER TOO

You are not training in isolation. The people around you matter. Put in the effort to develop relationships with your classmates and instructors. Classes that work well together tend to do better collectively. Your classmates may become your coworkers. The instructors and qualified controllers you work with will often teach you as much through observation, attitude, and example as through a lesson plan.

That does not mean trying to impress people. It means being someone others can trust to learn seriously, communicate respectfully, and contribute to a professional environment.

ADDITIONAL TRAINEE SUPPORT

NAV's THRIVE Peer Program is also available to support you. Check out THRIVE, a confidential program for students and instructors who are involved in any operational training. The peers are volunteers who provide support and mentor students and instructors throughout their training.

THRIVE is not intended to be therapy, but peers are "trained listeners" who can spot needs and provide both moral and practical support to address those needs.

For more information, visit: <https://my-ma.navcanada.ca/en/my-nav-canada/health-and-wellness/peer-support.aspx>.

Additional resources are available at: **catca.ca** in the **Wellness Corner**.

TIP SUMMARY

A quick reference to keep with you throughout training.

- **Take training seriously.** This is the start of a safety-critical career, and professionalism matters from day one.
- **Keep showing up.** Consistency, effort, and attitude matter more than trying to look naturally confident or perfect.
- **Come to training ready to perform.**
One of the simplest but most important habits you can build early is showing up each day prepared, rested, and fit for duty.
- **Ask questions early.** ATC is a communication job, and speaking up when you are unsure is part of learning well.
- **Build strong daily habits.** Review notes, practise phraseology out loud, and keep track of mistakes, scenarios, and lessons learned.
- **Do not be afraid to make mistakes.** Training is where you learn by trying, adjusting, and improving.
- **Focus on the standard, not your peers.** Everyone progresses differently; what matters is your own growth over time.
- **Expect each phase to feel different.** Classroom builds understanding, simulation builds judgment, and OJT builds confidence in real operations.
- **Learn the why, not just the how.** Understanding why something works will help you adapt when situations change.
- **Take debriefs seriously.** Reflection is part of training, not something separate from it.
- **Stay coachable.** Feedback is there to help you improve, not to define you.
- **Manage yourself well.** Sleep, food, hydration, mental breaks, and managing outside stress all affect performance.

- **Protect your mindset.** A rough day does not define you; reset and come back ready to learn.
- **Work on fitting in.** This is a career for life and being someone others want to work beside matters.
- **Show humility and respect.** Respect is a two-way street, and entitlement can quickly damage trust and credibility.
- **Build your reputation early.** Be professional, be prepared, and make the effort to meet people where they are.
- **Keep this handbook with you.** Training is a long journey, and sometimes the most helpful thing is a reminder at the right moment.

FINAL THOUGHT

There may be times in training when you feel behind, uncertain, or convinced that everyone else has it figured out except you. That feeling is common. It does not mean you do not belong here.

You were selected for a reason. Keep showing up. Stay curious. Stay steady. Stay coachable. Piece by piece, the job starts to come together.

"Nobody here is smarter than you - they have just been here longer."



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**Canadian Air Traffic
Control Association**