4 Easy Steps to Consistent Landings
Setting yourself up for better landings in the wind

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Introduction
Most pilots have been led to believe that stick time and getting better at making corrections are the main requirements for better landings, and thus little thought is given to how they land or whether they are flying correctly. As a consequence of flying without a plan and merely reacting to whatever the airplane does, most pilots end up making 3 to 4 times more control inputs than what is required when the landing is set up correctly. This type of flying demands more effort and is the reason why pilots get behind their airplanes during the runway lineup and landing flare. Reactive flying is also why many flyers struggle to land on windier days or when flying a new model, i.e., anytime variables are introduced. On the other hand, a characteristic of good pilots is that they always seem to make landing look easy. That’s because while most flyers are continually making corrections, better flyers set up their landings so that fewer adjustments are needed altogether, thus allowing them more time to contemplate throttle and trim adjustments leading to an easier-smoother touchdown. In short, most landing difficulties are not due to a lack of stick time, inadequate reflexes, or wind, but are primarily the result of reacting to the airplane rather than pro-actively controlling the airplane throughout the landing setup.

Anticipate the Final Turn
As a rule, the ease of your landings reflects the quality of the final base leg turn that sets them up. This is to say that while a person might have the ability to salvage a landing after a poor turn, the experience will be far busier and more stressful. On the other hand, the comfort that coincides a nice final turn tends to stay with the pilot all the way to the touchdown.

In order to come out of the final turn over the runway’s extended centerline (without needing to make a lot of adjustments) the pilot must account for the effect of the wind on the turn (figure 1). That is, you’ll need to anticipate whether the wind will cause the turn to become wider or tighter and target where to start the turn from with this in mind. In short, to come out of the final turn lined up with the runway, good pilots look to adjust where they start the turn from, rather than adjusting the turn itself (figure 2).

Maintain a Mostly Level Turn
The next crucial step is keeping the final base leg turn reasonably level. Maintaining an even-speed turn, not climbing or descending more than a few degrees minimizes anxiety during the turn and prevents excess speed from building up and becoming another distraction. A reasonably level turn also eliminates the low altitude oscillations or porpoising that can so easily take your attention away from

Anticipate a more compact turn when turning into a crosswind and start the turn closer to the runway’s extended centerline in order to come out lined up with the runway.

Anticipate a wider turn when turning with the wind will and fly wide before initiating the turn in order to come out lined up with the runway.
maintaining a good lineup. If keeping your final turn reasonably level results in high landing approaches, rather than pushing the nose down and building up excess speed, simply pull the throttle back a little earlier, or do as the pros do and enter the final turn at a lower altitude to start with (figure 3).

Use Yourself as the Lineup Reference
Note that in most flying environments the runway is directly in front of where the pilots stand. Therefore, the most effective method to consistently overfly the runway centerline is to use yourself as the primary reference throughout the landing approach, and try to guide the airplane to a point slightly in front of you (figure 4). Flying the airplane to a point slightly in front of you is the secret to achieving the runway every time regardless of the model’s size, orientation (crosswind crabs) and helps limit the number of bad landings that result from relying on hit-or-miss depth perception.

Focus on Object as a Whole
A very common landing mistake is pointing the fuselage toward the runway during the approach in a crosswind. Note that while an airplane will crab into a crosswind, it will
continue to fly in a straight line as long as the wings are level (figure 5). Therefore, rather than pointing the fuselage where you want the plane to go, in a crosswind you must focus on where the “airplane as a whole” is tracking irrespective of the fuselage. People debate every year about how to use the controls (esp. rudder) to correct for crosswind drift during landing. Yet, if they knew to guide the airplane as a whole (versus pointing it), they wouldn’t have to correct for wind drift in the first place and would have more time to improve in other areas! Once again, rather than trying to guestimate the plane’s track over the ground, project where the airplane as a whole is traveling (relative to yourself) and you will be able to recognize deviations during the approach before they become otherwise obvious (figure 6). Then, when the runway comes into view, the tiny corrections needed to perfect the centerline will be negligible.

Lastly, pilots eager to land tend to focus so much on the throttle during the landing setup that they often only make half efforts to get the airplane lined up with the runway (figure 7). Pre-occupation with the throttle, a.k.a., P.O.W.T, is the main reason why many pilots regularly miss the runway centerline by as much as 50+ feet and/or 30 degrees. Conversely, by focusing on a timely exit of the turn and establishing a good line up with the runway before tinkering with the throttle, you will actually have more time to consider your throttle adjustments thanks to not having to make a lot of course corrections during the approach.

**Conclusion**

As a general rule, difficulty in a certain area, e.g., landing, seldom has to do with needing more practice in that area, but needing to do a better job in the areas that are putting you into difficulty. By far, most landing difficulties are the result of not starting the final base leg turn in the right spot, thus increasing the pilot’s workload. On the other hand, by paying attention to keeping the final turn reasonably level and thus preventing a build up of speed and anxiety, you are well on your way to cementing the key ingredients needed to master your landings regardless of the wind or what model you are flying. Happy landings!