

Sport Pilot or Private Pilot?

Compare U.S. single-engine airplane privileges after certification. SPL and PPL are common shorthand for FAA pilot certificates. Includes current MOSAIC rules.

COMPARE	SPORT PILOT (SPL)	PRIVATE PILOT (PPL)
Fly for fun / take trips	Yes. Local and cross-country flying under visual flight rules (VFR).	Yes. Local and cross-country flying under VFR.
Passengers	One maximum, even in an eligible four-seat airplane.	More than one, within aircraft, medical and qualification limits.
Night flying	Requires added night training, an endorsement, and an FAA medical or BasicMed. Otherwise daytime only. [1]	Yes. Night training is normally included; maintain night passenger currency.
IFR / flying in clouds	No. Visual flying only, with visual reference to the surface.	PPL alone: no. Add an instrument rating, maintain currency, and use an appropriately approved and equipped aircraft. [2]
Medical requirements	Daytime: a valid U.S. driver's license can qualify, subject to medical history and fitness requirements. [3]	Normally at least a third-class FAA medical. BasicMed is an alternative for eligible pilots. [3]
Aircraft choices	RV-12iS and other eligible airplanes: up to four seats, unpressurized, clean stall speed ≤59 KCAS; other rules apply. [4]	Broader choices with appropriate ratings, endorsements and qualifications. Includes the RV-12iS.
Towered airports / airspace	Yes, with training and endorsement for Class B, C and D / tower operations.	Yes, with required training and ATC clearances. Both have specific Class B airport restrictions.
Altitude	Up to 10,000 ft MSL or 2,000 ft above ground, whichever is higher.	No equivalent certificate cap; aircraft, airspace, oxygen and medical limits apply.
International flying	Only with prior authorization from the destination country.	Possible, subject to foreign, aircraft and medical requirements.
Business flying	No flying in furtherance of a business.	Certain incidental business flying is allowed, subject to restrictions.
Paid piloting	No paid piloting or carriage for hire.	Generally no; narrow regulatory exceptions exist.

VFR means staying in suitable visual weather. Both paths can support enjoyable regional trips. Sport flying also requires at least 3 statute miles visibility and visual reference to the surface. Aircraft operating limitations always apply. [4]

Choose the path that fits your goals

Training, medical planning and your next step - for single-engine airplane students.

COMPARE	SPORT PILOT (SPL)	PRIVATE PILOT (PPL)
Minimum flight time	20 hours: at least 15 instructor-led and 5 solo.	40 hours under Part 61: at least 20 instructor-led and 10 solo.
Added training	Night training is optional; no instrument rating privileges.	Required night and basic instrument training; more cross-country experience.

Minimums are not completion estimates. Progress and proficiency determine total time and cost. Sport training can count toward PPL when eligible; additional training and tests are required. [5]

Maneuver standards: many tolerances match

Steep turns: both use a 45° bank, altitude ± 100 ft, airspeed ± 10 kt, bank $\pm 5^\circ$, and rollout heading $\pm 10^\circ$.

Short-field landing: both require touchdown on the specified point or within 200 ft beyond it. [6]

The full tests are **not identical**. Sport uses the PTS; Private uses the ACS. For example, Sport slow flight is near the stall, while Private slow flight is performed without a stall warning. Many numeric tolerances match, but task instructions and test scope differ. [6]

Medical planning: expiration is different from denial

An **expired** medical does not automatically end all flying. Eligible private pilots may use BasicMed or daytime Sport privileges in a qualifying aircraft.

Denial, suspension, revocation, or withdrawal of special-issuance authorization can block BasicMed and driver's-license Sport flying until resolved. It is **not automatically a lifetime ban**; FAA eligibility may be restored, including through special issuance.

PPL students normally need an FAA medical before solo. BasicMed generally requires having held an FAA medical after July 14, 2006. All pilots must be fit to fly. If eligibility is uncertain, consult an aviation medical examiner before applying. [3]

Which one should you choose?

Choose Sport for mainly daytime recreational flying with one passenger, if its operating limits fit and you value the driver's-license medical option.

Choose Private for more passengers, broader aircraft choices, night training from the start, or a path to instrument flying and further certificates.

Let's match your training to your goals. Bogdan Cirliu, CFI / CFII • forge.aero

FAA REFERENCES • Click to open

[1] 14 CFR 61.329: Sport night privileges. FAA MOSAIC: changes effective Oct. 22, 2025.

[2] 61.3(e): instrument rating. [3] 61.23, 61.53, 61.303; FAA BasicMed; FAA medical-denial FAQ.

[4] 61.315, 61.316: Sport limits / aircraft. 61.113: Private privileges / limits.

[5] 61.313, 61.109: airplane experience. [6] Sport PTS FAA-S-8081-29B, pp. 30, 34, 38; Private ACS FAA-S-ACS-6C, pp. 25, 36, 42.