



First-Time Flying: The Complete Cheat Sheet

Everything you need to know for your first flight — step by step, no stress

Full guide: <https://yopki.com/guides/first-time-flying>

Flying for the first time can feel overwhelming, but millions of people fly safely every single day. This guide walks you through every step so there are zero surprises.

BEFORE YOU BOOK YOUR FLIGHT

- Compare prices on Google Flights, Kayak, Skyscanner, and airline websites
- Check if a nearby airport has cheaper flights
- Look for flights on Tuesdays and Wednesdays (usually cheapest)
- Book 4-8 weeks in advance for domestic, 2-3 months for international
- Choose a window seat for views, aisle seat for easy bathroom access
- Avoid back rows (near lavatories — noisy, last to deplane, seats may not recline)
- Avoid seats in front of emergency exits (seats may not recline)
- Choose exit row or bulkhead for extra legroom (may cost more)
- Save your confirmation number — you'll need it to check in
- Read the airline's baggage policy carefully before packing

PACKING YOUR BAGS

What to Wear on the Plane

- Comfortable, loose-fitting clothes (you'll be sitting for hours)
- Layers — planes alternate between hot and cold
- Slip-on shoes (you'll remove them at security)
- Avoid excessive metal jewelry (sets off metal detectors)
- Wear your bulkiest shoes to save luggage space
- Compression socks for flights over 4 hours (prevents swelling)

Carry-On Bag (Goes in Overhead Bin)

- Must fit airline size limits (typically 22" x 14" x 9" including wheels and handles)
- Change of clothes (in case your checked bag is delayed)
- Phone charger and power bank
- Headphones (wired earbuds = more reliable than Bluetooth on planes)
- Entertainment: book, tablet, downloaded movies/shows
- Snacks (solid food is fine through security)
- Empty water bottle (fill after security)
- Any medications you might need during the flight
- Travel pillow and eye mask (for longer flights)

Personal Item (Goes Under Seat in Front of You)

- Smaller bag: purse, small backpack, or laptop bag
- Passport / ID and boarding pass
- Wallet and phone
- Earbuds / headphones
- Gum or hard candy (helps with ear pressure)
- Pen (for customs forms on international flights)
- Tissues
- Lip balm and hand cream (planes are very dry)


TSA LIQUID RULES (3-1-1 RULE)

This is the #1 thing that trips up first-time flyers:

- All liquids, gels, creams, and pastes must be 3.4 oz (100 ml) or less per container
- All containers must fit in ONE quart-sized (1 liter) clear zip-top plastic bag
- ONE bag per person
- This includes: toothpaste, shampoo, lotion, contact solution, lip gloss
- Solid items are fine (deodorant stick, bar soap, solid perfume)
- Medications are exempt but may be inspected (keep in original containers)
- Baby formula and breast milk are exempt (declare at the checkpoint)

CHECKED BAGGAGE RULES

Airline	1st Bag Fee	2nd Bag Fee	Weight Limit	Size Limit
American Airlines	\$35	\$45	50 lbs	62 linear inches
Delta Air Lines	\$35	\$45	50 lbs	62 linear inches
United Airlines	\$35	\$45	50 lbs	62 linear inches
Southwest Airlines	FREE	FREE	50 lbs	62 linear inches
JetBlue (Blue Basic)	\$35	\$45	50 lbs	62 linear inches
Spirit Airlines	\$37-65+	\$47-75+	40 lbs	62 linear inches
Frontier Airlines	\$39-69+	\$49-79+	40 lbs	62 linear inches
Alaska Airlines	\$35	\$45	50 lbs	62 linear inches

 Prices vary by route and when you pay. Paying at check-in is usually more expensive than paying online. Always check the airline's website for current fees.

AIRPORT ARRIVAL TIMELINE

Flight Type	Arrive Before Departure	Why This Long
Domestic (no checked bags)	1.5 hours	Security can take 30-60 min at peak times
Domestic (with checked bags)	2 hours	Add time for bag check/drop
International	3 hours	Immigration + longer security + customs
During holidays/peak travel	Add 30-60 extra minutes	Lines are significantly longer

CHECK-IN: YOUR THREE OPTIONS

Option 1: Online Check-In (Recommended)

- Available 24 hours before departure (some airlines 48 hours)
- Use the airline's app or website
- Enter your confirmation number and last name
- Confirm or select your seat
- Save your boarding pass to Apple Wallet / Google Wallet
- Screenshot your boarding pass as a backup

Option 2: Airport Kiosk

- Find your airline's check-in kiosks (near the ticket counters)
- Scan your passport, credit card, or enter your confirmation number
- Follow the touchscreen prompts
- Print your boarding pass and baggage tags

Option 3: Airline Counter

- Find your airline's check-in counter (look for signs with the airline name)
- Wait in line (this is the slowest option)
- Show your ID and tell the agent your name or confirmation number
- Good for: first-time flyers who want human help, complex itineraries, or special requests

DROPPING OFF CHECKED LUGGAGE

- If you have bags to check, go to the airline counter or bag drop area
- Show your ID and boarding pass
- Place your bag on the scale (watch the weight — overweight fees are \$75-200!)
- Agent will attach a baggage tag — keep your claim receipt (the sticky tag stub)
- Remove ALL loose straps, hanging tags, or items that could get caught in conveyor belts
- Take a photo of your bag (helps identify it if it's lost)
- Verify the destination code on your bag tag matches where you're going (e.g., LAX, JFK, ORD)

TSA SECURITY CHECKPOINT — STEP BY STEP

This is the part most first-time flyers are nervous about. It's actually very straightforward:

Step 1: Get in Line

Look for the TSA checkpoint signs. Have your boarding pass and ID ready. A TSA agent will check both before you enter the screening area.

Step 2: Prepare Your Bins

Grab gray bins from the stack. You need to place the following IN bins:

- Shoes (must come off unless you have TSA PreCheck)
- Belt
- Jacket or coat
- Items from your pockets (phone, keys, wallet, coins)
- Laptop — must come out of your bag and go in its own bin
- Quart-sized bag of liquids — must come out of your bag

- Large electronics (tablets, gaming devices)

Step 3: Send Everything Through the X-Ray

Place bins and bags on the conveyor belt. Walk through the body scanner or metal detector when the agent signals you. Stand still with arms up if directed into the body scanner.

Step 4: Collect Your Items

Grab your bins on the other side. Put your shoes and belt back on. Repack your laptop and liquids. Don't rush — take a moment to make sure you have everything.

💡 If TSA wants to inspect your bag, stay calm — it happens all the time. They'll usually just open it, check something, and send you on your way.

TSA Prohibited Items (Cannot Be in Carry-On)

Never Allowed (Anywhere)	Carry-On: NO / Checked: YES	Allowed in Carry-On
Explosives / fireworks	Knives (all types)	Safety razor (no loose blades)
Flammable liquids	Box cutters / razor blades	Nail clippers
Realistic weapon replicas	Scissors (over 4" blades)	Scissors (under 4" blades)
Loaded firearms	Tools (over 7" long)	Knitting needles
Illegal drugs	Baseball bats, golf clubs	Corkscrew (no blade)
Tear gas / pepper spray	Martial arts weapons	Lighters (1 max, on person)
	Hockey sticks, ski poles	Batteries (in devices or carry-on)

FINDING YOUR GATE & BOARDING

- Check the departure screens for your flight number — find your gate and boarding time
- Follow signs to your gate (Terminal A, B, C → Gate A12, B7, etc.)
- Gates can change — check screens periodically
- Large airports may require a tram or shuttle between terminals (allow 15-20 min)
- Arrive at your gate at least 30 minutes before departure
- Use this time to: charge your phone, use the restroom, buy water/snacks, stretch
- Fill your water bottle at a water fountain (free! don't buy \$5 airport water)

Boarding Process

Boarding happens in groups/zones. Your boarding pass will say your group number.

- First: Pre-boarding (passengers needing assistance, families with small children)
- Then: First class and business class
- Then: Priority boarding (loyalty members, credit card holders)
- Then: Groups/zones in order (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 — or A, B, C)
- When your group is called, line up with your boarding pass and ID ready
- Scan your boarding pass at the gate (or show phone screen)
- Walk down the jet bridge to the airplane door

ON THE AIRPLANE

Finding Your Seat

- Look at your boarding pass for your seat number (e.g., 14A)
- The number is the row (14), the letter is the seat (A = window in most planes)
- Row numbers are on placards above the seats — walk down the aisle until you find yours

- Most planes: A = window, B = middle, C = aisle | D = aisle, E = middle, F = window
- Store your carry-on in the overhead bin ABOVE your seat (wheels first, handle out)
- Keep your personal item under the seat in front of you

Getting Settled

- Sit down, buckle your seatbelt, and adjust it to fit snugly at your hips
- The seatbelt stays on whenever the seatbelt sign is illuminated
- Put your phone in airplane mode when the door closes (you'll be reminded)
- Find the air vent above you — adjust it so you're comfortable
- Locate the call button (to summon a flight attendant if needed)
- Read the safety card in the seat pocket — note the nearest emergency exit
- Listen to the safety demonstration (yes, even experienced flyers should)

During the Flight

- Keep your seatbelt fastened whenever seated (even if the sign is off)
- The tray table folds down from the seat back in front of you (or from your armrest in some seats)
- Entertainment: use the seatback screen, your own device, or bring a book
- WiFi: Many airlines offer WiFi for purchase. Some offer free messaging apps
- Food and drinks: Flight attendants will come through the cabin with a cart
- Alcoholic drinks may cost extra; soft drinks, water, coffee, and juice are usually free
- Restroom: Wait until the seatbelt sign is off. Look for 'vacant/occupied' sign on the door
- Lock the restroom door by sliding the latch — this also turns on the light
- Stay hydrated — drink water regularly (cabin air is extremely dry)
- Stretch periodically — flex your ankles, stand up if possible on long flights
- Be kind to your neighbors — don't recline during meals, be mindful of shared armrests

EAR PRESSURE — 5 PROVEN SOLUTIONS

During takeoff and landing, the change in air pressure can cause ear discomfort or temporary hearing muffling. This is completely normal. Here's how to fix it:

Method	How It Works	Best For
Chew gum	Jaw movement opens eustachian tubes	Everyone — easiest method
Swallow frequently	Same tube-opening mechanism	If you don't have gum — sip water
Yawn (real or fake)	Wide jaw stretch opens the tubes	When chewing isn't enough
Valsalva maneuver	Pinch nose, close mouth, blow gently	Stubborn pressure — don't blow too hard
EarPlanes earplugs	Regulate air pressure gradually	People who always get ear pain — buy at airport

 Start these methods DURING takeoff and landing, not after the pain starts. If you have a cold or sinus congestion, take a decongestant 30 min before descent.

FLIGHT ANXIETY — 5 STRATEGIES THAT HELP

Nervousness is completely normal. Flying is statistically the safest form of transportation — safer than driving to the airport.

1. Understand turbulence

Turbulence feels dramatic but is completely safe. Planes are built to handle extreme turbulence. Think of it like a bumpy road — uncomfortable but not dangerous.

2. Choose your seat wisely

Seats over the wings experience the least turbulence. Window seats let you see outside, which helps some people. Aisle seats give you more room to move.

3. Breathe

When anxious: inhale slowly for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 6 counts. Repeat. This activates your parasympathetic nervous system.

4. Distract yourself

Download an engaging podcast, show, or audiobook BEFORE the flight. Something that requires attention works better than passive watching.

5. Tell the crew

Flight attendants are trained to help nervous flyers. Tell them when you board — they'll check on you and provide reassurance. No judgment.

LANDING & DEPLANING

- The pilot will announce the beginning of descent (usually 20-30 minutes before landing)
- Stow your tray table, put your seat upright, and ensure your seatbelt is fastened
- Stow all loose items in the seat pocket or under the seat
- Open your window shade (required for landing — so crew can see outside in emergency)
- Use ear pressure techniques during descent
- After landing, wait for the seatbelt sign to turn off before standing
- There's no rush — the door takes a few minutes to open regardless
- Grab your items: overhead bin first, then under-seat bag
- Check seat pocket for phone, passport, or anything you stowed
- Follow the crowd toward baggage claim (or your connecting gate)

BAGGAGE CLAIM

- Follow signs to 'Baggage Claim'
- Check the screens for your flight number — they'll show which carousel to go to
- Bags typically start arriving 10-20 minutes after landing
- Stand back from the carousel — don't crowd (you'll see your bag coming)
- Verify the bag is yours (check the luggage tag) — many bags look alike
- If your bag doesn't arrive: go to the airline's baggage service office (near baggage claim)
- Show them your bag claim receipt (the sticker stub from check-in)
- They'll track your bag and usually deliver it to your hotel/home within 24 hours
- File a claim immediately — most airlines compensate for delayed bags

CONNECTING FLIGHTS / LAYOVERS

- A layover means you change planes at a middle airport before reaching your destination
- Your boarding pass should show both flights. If not, check the airline app
- After landing, follow signs to 'Connecting Flights' — NOT 'Baggage Claim' or 'Exit'
- Your checked bags transfer automatically — you don't need to re-collect them (domestic)
- For international connections, you MAY need to collect bags, clear customs, and re-check

- Check departure screens for your next gate — it may differ from what your boarding pass says
- Allow at least 1 hour for domestic connections, 2 hours for international
- If you miss a connection due to a delayed flight, the airline will rebook you for free
- Use layover time to: eat, charge your phone, stretch your legs, use the restroom

INTERNATIONAL ARRIVAL — CUSTOMS & IMMIGRATION

- Fill out any arrival/customs declaration forms (usually distributed on the plane)
- Follow signs to 'Immigration' or 'Passport Control' after deplaning
- Have your passport, visa (if required), and any completed forms ready
- Answer the immigration officer's questions clearly and politely (purpose of visit, length of stay, where staying)
- You may have your photo and fingerprints taken (this is standard)
- After immigration, collect your checked luggage at baggage claim
- Proceed to 'Customs' — declare any items over the duty-free allowance
- If you have 'nothing to declare,' walk through the green channel
- If you have items to declare, walk through the red channel
- After customs, you'll enter the arrivals hall — look for transportation, meeters, or ATMs

COMMON FIRST-TIME MISTAKES TO AVOID

- X Arriving too late:** Always follow the arrival timeline above. TSA lines can be unpredictable.
- X Not checking in online:** Check in 24 hours before. If you don't, you may get a middle seat or no seat.
- X Packing liquids wrong:** Re-read the 3-1-1 rule above. TSA will throw away your expensive shampoo.
- X Not charging devices:** Charge everything to 100% the night before. Airport outlets are limited and fought over.
- X Going to the wrong terminal:** Confirm your terminal and gate before leaving for the airport. Check the airline app.
- X Forgetting your ID:** You cannot fly without a valid government-issued photo ID. Period.
- X Overpacking your carry-on:** If it doesn't fit in the overhead bin, they'll make you gate-check it (and it may get lost).
- X Not drinking water:** Airplane cabin humidity is 10-20% — drier than a desert. Drink water throughout the flight.
- X Standing up before the seatbelt sign is off:** You'll get yelled at by a flight attendant. Just wait.
- X Not telling the crew you're nervous:** They want to help. Tell them. It's literally part of their training.

GLOSSARY OF AIRLINE & AIRPORT TERMS

Boarding pass: Your ticket to get on the plane. Shows your name, flight, seat, gate, and boarding group.

Gate: The waiting area and door where you board the airplane. Identified by a letter + number (e.g., B12).

Terminal: A building or section of the airport. Large airports have multiple terminals.

Concourse: The hallway of gates within a terminal.

Jet bridge / jetway: The enclosed walkway from the gate to the airplane door.

Tarmac: The paved area where planes taxi, park, and load.

Taxiing: When the airplane drives on the ground to/from the runway.

Runway: The long strip where the plane takes off and lands.

Overhead bin: The storage compartments above your seat for carry-on bags.

Bulkhead: The wall between sections of the plane (e.g., between first class and economy). Bulkhead seats have extra legroom but no under-seat storage.

Red-eye: A flight that departs late at night and arrives early morning.

Layover: A stop between flights, usually 1-4 hours at a connecting airport.

Nonstop vs. Direct: Nonstop = no stops at all. Direct = same flight number, may stop but you stay on the plane.

Codeshare: A flight operated by one airline but sold by another (e.g., booked on Delta, operated by KLM).

Gate check: When your carry-on is taken at the gate and put in the cargo hold. You pick it up at the jet bridge upon arrival.

Deplaning: Getting off the airplane after arrival.

Customs: Government checkpoint where they check what you're bringing into the country.

Immigration: Government checkpoint where they verify your identity and permission to enter the country.

Duty-free: Shops in the airport where you can buy goods without paying certain taxes.

TSA PreCheck: A US program (\$78/5 years) that gives you a faster security line — keep shoes on, laptop stays in bag.

Global Entry: A US program (\$100/5 years) that includes TSA PreCheck + faster customs/immigration on return.

ETIAS: European Travel Information and Authorization System — required for US citizens visiting EU from 2025.

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