The Basics of RC Flying Etiquette
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Over the years, certain informal rules of etiquette have evolved that help make the RC hobby safer and friendlier when flying with others.

1. Toe the Line

Whether flying at an RC club field or an informal gathering of modelers, you'll find that there are almost always specific areas designated as a no-fly zones. These restricted areas are there for a good reason. That's where people can park their cars, set up their gear, and watch all of the action without having to worry about dodging model aircraft. It's no fun to be unpacking your model and have a plane buzz by dangerously close.

When you show up to a new flying spot, ask others what the layout is. You need to know where it is okay to fly and what areas you should avoid. Ignoring this fundamental tenet of RC piloting is a surefire way to garner negative attention from your peers and spoil a fun outing.

2. Hold That Thought

Some pilots like to talk while flying, others are tight-lipped. Find out before striking up a mid-flight conversation.

It doesn't usually bother me at all when people want to chat with me while I'm flying. I don't mind answering questions about my model or anything else as I guide my plane through the sky. But not everyone feels the same way. Some modelers prefer to avoid any distractions while they're on the sticks. It's not a matter of skill or confidence. It's just personal preference. Consider this before you initiate conversation with an actively-flying pilot. If you don't know their preference for chatting on the flightline, it's best to wait until they land.

The one notable exception to my open-mouth policy is when I'm training a new pilot. To me, my prime role as an instructor is to minimize distractions and help the student focus on the fundamentals of flying. That's hard to do when someone walks up during a training flight and asks me if I've seen 'Wonder Woman' yet. Even worse is when they offer the student unsolicited flying tips while I'm instructing them. One coach is plenty… two is detrimental.

3. Two is a Crowd…Maybe

Flying multiple models with radically dissimilar performance can create in-flight hazards. Sometimes it's better to wait.

As with talking, some modelers are leery about flying when other models are in the sky. I don't think it's selfish. They just have difficulty tuning out the other models and focusing on their own airplane (or helicopter, or multi-rotor). At a crowded flying location, it isn't always practical to put up just one model at a time. But it's nice to accommodate those who prefer solo flights when you can. This is especially true when dealing with pilots in training, the maiden flight of a new model, or a particularly demanding model.

4. The Tortoise and the Hare

Even when it is generally agreed to have multiple models flying at the same time, you want to avoid having too wide of a performance envelope. For the same reason that it is a bad idea to ride a skateboard on the interstate, it is often inadvisable to mix particularly fast models with very slow ones. The odds of mid-air conflicts are much greater than with similar-performing models. Sure, it can be done with proper coordination. But it's not cool to launch your fast, pointy jet while a park-flyer is flitting about.

I've been to many flying sites where a certain area is designated for hovering models such as helicopters, multi-rotors, and prop-hanging airplanes. Another area is reserved for more traditional models to fly in a racetrack pattern. I've also been to RC events where certain types of models are allowed to fly in specific time slots to help avoid potential conflicts. I'm not suggesting that such extremes are always necessary. But the fundamental issue is something to keep in mind on your average Saturday morning flying trip.

5. Lines of Communication
When you're flying, your attention should be on your model. So, it's tough to have good situational awareness of the world outside the sphere of your little model. The best solution is to have a spotter by your side to act as your eyes and ears in the big picture. But having a spotter isn't always possible. That's why it is important to broadcast your intentions to other pilots. They need to know things like whether the runway is blocked or you're having an in-flight emergency.
RC pilots have limited situational awareness. Speak up and let other flyers know what's going on.

I've seen slightly varied customs at different flying locations, but it is generally accepted that you announce to other pilots (in a loud, clear voice) when you are:

Obscuring the runway with your model or yourself - "On the runway"

Off the runway – "Runway clear"

About to take off/hand-launch/land – "Taking off left to right"

Making a low pass over the runway - "Low pass right to left"

Having an in-flight emergency – "Dead stick!"

It's nice to get an acknowledgement of your announcements from other pilots. A simple "OK" will suffice. If you're not flying and have an opportunity to reply with more detail, that can be even better. For instance, if someone yells "Dead stick!" (meaning that their engine quit), you can give them a quick rundown to help them land safely. "The traffic has cleared and the runway is yours." In general, voice call-outs should be used to provide everyone with a more detailed situational awareness.

6. Watch Where You Point That Thing
Propellers are dangerous. We tend to focus our attention on avoiding them only when we are close to a running model. Sure, that's a good idea. But props can also be dangerous to those outside the immediate area. They have been known to shed blades or come completely off of the airplane. The best way to prevent injury to innocent bystanders in such a situation is to ensure that your model is forward of and pointing away from other people before starting your motor or engine on the ground. Likewise,

you shouldn't linger in those danger zones when others are starting up.
Model aircraft props are dangerous and sometimes fail. Make sure to orient your model to minimize the risk to bystanders.

Consider the potential prop failure scenarios and where the parts might fly. Detached blades will travel radially. Whole props will fly forward. Both are dangerous. Many clubs have designated start-up areas. Use them if they exist. Otherwise, make sure that you are running your motor in a safe location. Also inspect your props regularly and replace them at the first sign of any damage.

7. You Break It, You Bought It
The pit area at a flying field can be packed with lots of expensive toys. So be careful where you step! If you (or your child, dog, etc.) inadvertently cause damage to someone else's airplane, be ready to pay for it. Of course a lot of models are custom-built and assessing repair costs is difficult. It's better to just be extra careful and avoid the whole situation.

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Prior to the advent of 2.4GHz radio systems, it was possible to accidentally "shoot down" someone else's model by turning on a radio tuned to their frequency. That was another instance where you were expected to get out your checkbook and make things right. Now, it's possible to commit a similar faux pas with FPV systems. Transmitting a video signal on a frequency already in use could cause a goggle-wearing pilot to lose their video feed and possibly crash. Mind the FPV management rules at your site to avoid that kind of uncomfortable situation.

Modelers will sometimes ask a more-experienced pilot to fly a new airplane for them. In doing so, they also release that pilot from any responsibility for a crash. Whatever happens, happens. Unless you're very close friends, asking to fly someone else's model is a little like asking to borrow their toothbrush. You can expect a strange look in reply.

8. Tread Lightly
Okay, I'll admit it. Litter is not really a book in the RC bible. It's more of a personal pet peeve of mine. Even so, I see it happen often enough at flying sites that I think it's worth mentioning here. Most people I fly with are conscientious enough to pick up their usual trash: snack wrappers, drink bottles, etc. Yet some of those same people will passively toss other bits of RC detritus on the ground: used zip-ties, Velcro backing, product packaging, etc. It's all garbage and should be disposed of accordingly.

One of the biggest sources of unusual garbage at the flying field is crashed airplanes. Some crashes are bad enough that the whole airplane belongs in a trash bag. It's okay... it happens to everyone. You're probably not in the best mental state after a horrible crash, but it's still important to make sure that you gather up all of the pieces. You should pay special attention to recovering batteries so that they do not pose a fire or contamination risk.

9. Crash Crew
Crashes happen to everyone. Lend a hand in picking up the pieces.

Speaking of crashed airplanes, it's good form to help someone retrieve what's left of their broken airplane from the crash site. Sometimes the debris field is spread out. Having all hands on deck can really speed things along. You'll have to assess the pilot's

attitude before deciding if it's too early for jokes at their expense. The time for good-natured ribbing will come sooner for some than others.

10. Location, Location, Location
One of the perennial challenges facing the model aviation community is finding and maintaining adequate flying sites. Traditional RC airplanes are hampered by the large area needed to fly them and their often-noisy engines. Multi-rotors and electric-powered park-flyer models are quiet and can be flown in relatively small places. This opens up a lot of potential flying sites such as parks, athletic fields, and schoolyards. Unfortunately, use of such locations is sometimes forbidden by local laws. It's a good idea to check with authorities before flying at a public area. Otherwise, you might end up getting a citation.
Flying directly over people is a no-no. Most flying sites have designated no-fly zones for that reason.

The biggest hurdle when flying at public parks is making sure that you are not a nuisance or danger to anyone else there. You need to have an open area to yourself that will not require you to overfly (or get anywhere near) non-flying people. The general public has no idea that the prop(s) on a RC model can cut to the bone…or worse. They see them as toys and generally do not appreciate their dangers. So it's your job to make sure you give everyone else a wide berth.

You may also find an enticing privately-owned field that would make a perfect flying spot. Maybe it's a neighborhood churchyard or that pasture just down the road. Whatever the case, ask permission before you fly there. The hobby already has an image problem with the general public. Blatant trespassing certainly doesn't help.
Always fly at an appropriate location where you won't annoy or endanger anyone else.

It's helpful to make it a win-win proposition when you ask a landowner for flying privileges. Make sure they know that you'll be respectful of any equipment, crops, or livestock in the area, pick up litter, and leave the place looking better than you found it. With any luck, you'll get the nod. Just be aware that such deals can get tricky to manage if other field-oriented hobbyists (golfers, kite flyers, dog walkers, etc.) see you using a private field and assume it is open to them also.

Wrap Up
There you have it: my 10 fundamental points of RC flying etiquette. I don't claim this list to be all-inclusive. Norms in your particular area may be a little different. Whatever, the case, the big takeaway here is that most potential conflicts with other modelers of the general public can be avoided with just a little foresight, a humble demeanor, and good communication. So go out and have fun while being a good steward of the RC hobby.