

Flying 101: How to get on a plane by yourself

Step One: make sure you're at the right airport

This is the easiest step, generally. Look on your ticket/boarding pass/flight confirmation. I mean, you'll probably know what airport you're going from but some places have multiple airports so make sure you don't turn up at London Gatwick when your flight is going from London Luton etc.

Make sure you leave enough time to get there and factor in unexpected problems like a closed road or a cancelled train. Aim to arrive at least two hours before a flight from a big airport and an hour before a flight from a small airport

Step Two: find the right terminal

Again, consult your paperwork. As a general rule, if there's more than one airport attached to a city it's more likely to have multiple terminals. It's usually relatively easy to get between terminals if you've arrived at the wrong one but it's easier to go to the right one in the first place so check that before you head out.

Step Three: checking in

Somewhere near the door there will probably be a screen telling you which desks to check in at. At a small regional airport there will only be a few desks so just look at the screens over their heads but at a bigger one, you may have to identify your check-in zone and then find your desk within that.

You only need to check in if:

- you haven't checked in online

and/or

- you need to check in luggage

If you've checked in online and have your boarding pass and you're only carrying hand luggage, you can skip this step. If you've checked in online but haven't been able to print your boarding pass or get it on your phone, go to the desk & they'll print it for you.

Otherwise, get out any relevant paperwork before you approach the desk. Generally, staff will be able to find your booking by just swiping your passport, that's one of the reasons why you have to enter all your passport details beforehand. Otherwise, they'll take the booking number off your confirmation. If you've already checked in, hand over your boarding pass and passport. Then you put your hold luggage on the conveyer. The machine will weigh it and the person behind the desk will attach a label to it. They'll give you a sticky barcode to hold onto - if the luggage gets lost, this will help staff at the other airport to identify and find it. Don't stick it inside your passport - those pages are meant to be empty for official purposes and if you try to pull it out and tear the pages, it technically invalidates your passport and you do not want to run into an officious official with a torn passport. Stick it on the back cover or on the back of your boarding pass.



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Step Three: checking in (continued)

Things to remember about checking in your luggage:

- Make sure you've got all your important stuff in your hand luggage
 - Documents
 - Medication
 - Money & wallet
 - Keys
 - Electronics with lithium batteries (laptops, phones etc)
 - Anything breakable
- Make sure any liquids in your hand luggage are within limits - 100ml containers and enough to fit in a small ziplock bag.
- Make sure you don't have any sharp objects in your hand luggage.
- Check your luggage weight limit - if it's overweight, you might get charged extra. Pretty much anything can be accommodated but it may well come at a cost.
- If you're travelling with hand luggage, you *might* be able to put it in the hold for free by asking nicely something like "how much would it cost to put it in the hold?" Airlines know there isn't enough room on the plane for all that hand luggage and this is the point where you're most likely to get it for free - and it means you don't have to carry it around the airport. Just make sure you remove the above precious things before you check it in.

Step Four: security

Once you've got your boarding pass and handed in your luggage, it's time for the most dreaded step in an airport: security.

First you'll have to show your boarding pass and maybe your passport in order to gain entry to security. Sometimes that'll be handing it to a real human, sometimes you'll scan it at a gate. If it's a self-scan, put the barcode or QR code on your boarding pass face down on the scanning plate.

Once you're through, it's time for actual security. There are a few simple rules that apply anywhere in the world.

- Remove your liquids, if you have any. If you do, they should all be in a small ziplock bag. The airport will often provide them but I'd always take one with me to be sure. Sandwich bags do the job just fine. Whatever you have has to fit inside the bag and the bag has to zip up. All liquids must be 100ml or less. A liquid is anything even slightly wet - a paste, a lotion, an oozy thing, they all count as liquid. Shampoo, deodorant, lip balm, mascara - these are all liquids. Put them in the tray.
- Take out large electronics. "Large electronics" varies from airport to airport. A laptop will always count and tablets usually do. Kindles vary, cameras vary. Generally people aren't interested in seeing phones. The staff will tell you exactly what they want to see and if they don't, it's better to ask before than to get caught after. Take them out of your bag, take them out of their cases and put them in the tray. You may need to prove that they're working electronics so make sure they're pretty well charged.
- Take off coats and jackets. Security staff don't want you wandering through with an entire arsenal hidden under a big coat, so outer layers come off. You can leave things in those pockets, except the things listed above.



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Step Four: security (continued)

- Accessories - take off anything metallic. People always say belts but that depends on whether they have a metal buckle. I have a big chunky chrome watch so I take that off and my El Camino bracelets but generally a necklace is so no problem. Wired bras will sometimes set off the metal detector but you'll have to leave that on. Glasses are fine to stay on.
- Empty your pockets. My dad is always trying to go through with his body weight in small coins in his trouser pockets. Empty all that either in your outerwear pockets or just into the tray. I tend to put my watch and bracelets into my jacket pocket because then I know I can't lose them in the tray.
- Shoes. This is a harder question and you can't predict what staff will want from you. Generally if your footwear is very metallic, take it off. If it's not, leave it on. Goth boots covered in buckles will set off the metal detector. Foam flipflops will not. Ask the staff if you're not sure.
- Sometimes they want you to put your bag in a tray, sometimes just on the belt. If they don't tell you, just ask - or assume it's meant to go in a tray.

Now you have to go through the metal detector. Most of them are just a big arch that you walk under but some are body scanners, where you have to stop and hold your hands up and it photographs you. Mostly you'll walk straight through but don't panic if you get stopped. It's probably caught your bra or the button on your jeans or it's just reached that "it's time to randomly beep!" moment.

I've got stopped and frisked so many times that I'm almost disappointed if it doesn't happen. Generally you stand aside with your arms held out and an officer of your gender will pat you down. Yes, this will feel pretty personal, having a stranger's hands literally all over you in public but all they're looking for is suspicious bulges, bombs, things like that. They'll pay particular attention to whichever area is lit up red on their screen and if they don't find anything, they'll send you on your way. If they find anything innocuous - say that big chunky watch you put in your trouser pocket by accident instead of in your jacket in the tray - they'll make an exasperated face at you and then pop it back through the metal detector to put it in a tray on its own to go through the x-ray machine.

You might get swabbed for drugs. They'll rub a cotton pad attached to a plastic stick over your hands and feet and maybe a couple of other places and then they'll put it in a special machine that detects drugs. If you don't have any drugs and haven't been near any drugs recently, you should pass no problem. I think these machines might also detect explosive residue too.

Don't worry about what people are thinking, don't be humiliated or ashamed by the experience. It happens all the time and everyone else is so preoccupied with getting through here themselves that they're really not watching what's going on with you.

While this is happening, your trays and bags are going through the x-ray machine. Most likely they'll come straight through. Take them away to the repacking area, put everything back in your bag, round your wrists, in your pockets etc. Make sure you don't leave anything behind, especially your documentation. Put your trays back in the collection pile.

If your trays do get flagged, don't worry. Someone will ask you to come and look at it. They'll probably ask you to open it for them - I guess they don't want to undo a zip only for something nasty to pop out and kill or injure them, so unzip or undo whatever they ask when and only when they ask. They'll have a little look through, move things, rearrange things and generally upset your packing. Then they'll find a little tube of moisturiser that you forgot or the coins in your wallet will have fallen together into a weird-shaped heap or they won't like the way your charging cables are lying on top of your book. They might swab it for drugs and explosives too and when it's passed its tests, take it away and repack it to your liking.



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Step Four: security (continued)

Important notes on security:

- **Do not mention bombs or explosives** - this is a recipe for getting yourself dragged into custody for a couple of hours. Security staff do not have a sense of humour so don't even think about making jokes about these subjects.
- Don't argue with security staff - they hold all the cards here and they can make your journey very difficult
- Don't get upset if you or your bag gets searched - unless you're carrying a bomb (don't mention a bomb!), you'll get through fine eventually
- Make sure you leave plenty of time for this bit - security itself can be fairly slow but the queue to get in can last forever
- Be polite and nice to staff - no matter how angry or upset you are for getting frisked or getting your luggage searched, don't say anything except "thank you, bye" in a pleasant tone.

Step Five: departures

The first thing I do after security is locate a departure board to see 1) what gate I'm going from 2) when I need to go to the gate. Generally it won't tell you what gate until relatively shortly before the flight leaves. I've seen it as late as ten minutes before departure but it's generally 20-40 minutes in advance. Mostly it'll tell you something like "gate info at 14:25" so you'll know when to come and check for your gate info. I know not everyone does but personally, I go to my gate as soon as it's announced. There will be directions to your gate hanging from the ceiling. In small airports your gate will probably be right there in front of you. At big airports, the sign might include a warning like "25 minute walk to gate", so look out for that.

If it tells you to wait for info, or "relax and shop", you've got time to enjoy the delights of the airport. There are always places to eat, so eat now if you're hungry. Find a shop where you can buy snacks for the plane. It's expensive at the airport but it's even more expensive on the plane. Now you're through security, it's generally safe to buy a drink in a bottle. It's already gone through extensive security to get into the shop in the first place so it's allowed on the plane. Pick up a newspaper or a book, find some sweets, go and buy some expensive perfume or makeup in duty free. Have you forgotten your headphones? There's always a shop where you can buy a stupidly expensive replacement pair.

And then find a seat and make yourself comfortable. I like to be close enough to a departure board that I can check it regularly without having to either leave my luggage unsupervised or take it all with me and run the risk of losing my seat.

When the gate number comes up, follow directions to your gate.

Step Six: boarding

You may have to show your documents again at the gate, either to gain entry to the small lounge or to get through the gate to the plane. Keep it close at hand and make yourself comfortable. The wait at the gate can be longer than the wait in the terminal.

When it comes to boarding, listen to the instructions. If everyone crowds at the gate at once, no one will get on. You've probably got a seat assigned already; it'll be there no matter whether you're the first or the last on the plane. But the luggage lockers will fill up very quickly - hand luggage suitcases get bigger every trip I'm on and people seem to think it's ok to bring more and more pieces of hand luggage. So the earlier you board, the more chance you've got of getting in the locker above your head. Anyway, listen to instructions.



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Step Six: boarding (continued)

They'll probably call priority boarders first - they're the ones who've paid to be first on. Then anyone who needs assistance and anyone with small children. Then they'll probably call you by row - well, not literally by row but "anyone in rows 17-30" and so on, starting at the back. Check your boarding pass - the number is your row, the letter is your seat. 31A on a Flybe plane is generally the seat by the port window in the back row, for example.

Sometimes you'll board by a jetbridge - that's a kind of movable concertina tube bridge that connects the building to the plane door. Sometimes you'll walk out onto the tarmac and go up the plane steps. Sometimes you'll board a bus and be taken out to the plane. Sometimes everyone boards from the front door, sometimes there's a back door entrance too for passengers in the back half of the plane.

Get in the plane, find your seat and get out of the aisle as quickly as possible. Nothing drives me crazier when I'm trying to get to the back row than progressing one row at a time as every single passenger stands there trying to force a massive suitcase into a small locker and blocking the aisle for everyone. I generally dump whatever's in my hands on my seat - that's my documents, my book, my sunglasses and my iPod and headphones - and then I shove my bag under the seat in front of me. I notice most people don't do that but it makes life so much easier. You can get at your stuff throughout the flight without having to get up, you can get at it even when the seatbelt sign is on and you don't have to wait to dig it out on landing.

Get comfortable, put on your seatbelt and fly. Watch the movie, read your book, enjoy the view, whatever gets you through the flight.

Step Seven: flying

When everyone's on board, the crew will close and "arm" the doors. That means if it's opened, an escape slide will automatically inflate. The captain or co-pilot will greet the passengers, introduce the cabin crew and tell you anything you need to know about the flight. Then the plane will be pushed back, away from the building or other planes and make its way towards the runway. At this point, the cabin crew will do the safety demonstration. You should watch this carefully and pay attention. No one ever does. You should remain seated with your seatbelt fastened, seat back upright, window blind opened and tray stowed. They'll tell you this, several times. The plane will drive to the end of the runway and when it's clear, it'll take off.

Once the plane is in the air and the ascent is less steep, the seatbelt sign will go off. Now you can close your blind (please don't!), recline your seat (please don't!), go to the toilet, open the lockers and more or less do what you want.

The cabin crew will serve food and drinks at some point. Unless you ordered a meal when you booked the ticket, you'll have to pay for this. Exact cash in a variety of currencies is usually fine, cards are usually fine.

They may offer shopping as well - more of the stuff you get in duty free, mostly.

The flight will probably be tedious. There may be turbulence - this can be uncomfortable but pilots try to avoid it by flying above it and no plane has ever been shaken out of the air. Ignore it as best you can.

Towards the end of the flight they'll collect rubbish, get the blinds and tables and seat backs reset for landing, hand out landing cards (ask if you're not sure whether you need one) and get everyone settled for the final descent, which usually takes 20-25 minutes.

The last thirty seconds, when you may be able to see the runway, will probably feel like the fastest part of the entire flight. Lean back in your seat - braking on landing can be prett



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Step Eight: landing

When you land, it'll take quite a while to get off the plane. It has to park, it has to be secured, a bridge or steps have to arrive, it all has to be checked and then all the people in front of you have to get up, stand in the aisle while they force their massive suitcase out of the locket and put on their coat and find their passport and it takes forever.

Inside the new airport, you can generally follow your fellow passengers. But there will signs to either the exit, baggage reclamation or passport control. Follow them. If you're going through passport control, make sure you have your passport handy. If you need a landing card, someone will probably have given you one on the plane and you fill in your details on it. I've never filled one in - I'm not entirely sure who needs one but it's definitely not Europeans flying around Europe. You'll stand in a long queue and then you'll either hand it to a human being or you'll go up to a biometric gate. Don't take any photos in this area.

If passport control is a human, they'll either glance at your passport and wave you through with a grunt or they'll scrutinise it and stare at you and you'll be able to see them wondering if this is definitely the person in the picture. If it's genuinely you, you'll have no problem. You'll have had a problem getting on the plane in the first place if you've got someone else's passport. Don't use your phone at this part.

If it's a gate, you'll need to be over 18 and have a special symbol on the passport cover. You walk up to the gate when the light is green, put your picture page face down on the scanning panel and look at a screen. It'll give you instructions so you know exactly where these places are. These things often don't work. If they don't, a member of staff will instruct you out of the gate and send you to the stand-by human being who's waiting exclusively for people whose biometric passports aren't working. If they do work, the gates will open and you can step through.

Now you continue to baggage reclaim. If you have baggage to reclaim, there will be a screen telling you which conveyor belt your luggage is on. It can take a really long time for luggage to arrive here so don't panic if it doesn't immediately turn up. If it never appears, there are desks dotted around luggage reclaim and you can go and see them and present them with your barcode and they'll track it down. Airlines have a reputation for losing luggage but for what it's worth, it's never happened to me. If it doesn't appear immediately, it'll probably take an absolute minimum of a day or two to get it to you, so make contingency plans. This is why you keep important stuff with you.

If you don't have any luggage to reclaim, go to baggage reclaim anyway because this is where the exit is. You'll have two or three choices - "nothing to declare", "something to declare" or sometimes "entry from EU". "Something to declare" generally means you've got a large amount of cash or a large amount of alcohol or tobacco - within the import limits but enough that you need to inform the authorities. If you're coming from the EU and have nothing to declare, I think you can pretty much take your choice of "nothing to declare" or "entry from EU". Walk straight through. Don't look at anything and definitely don't take photos of anything.

And now you're in arrivals! Maybe there's someone waiting for you - maybe you need to make your way onward by yourself. Look for directions to buses, trains or car hire.

Congratulations! You survived getting on a plane all by yourself!

