



Declare an Emergency or Not?

Featuring [John Krug](#)

Subscriber question:

"Suppose I'm unsure if my situation warrants declaring an emergency. Would the controller rather I use the E-word, or just ask for some assistance?" — Tom L.

"As pilot-in-command, you are responsible for the safe outcome of the flight. The regulations provide you with the authority and discretion to declare an emergency and to mobilize any ATC resources. If the safe outcome of the flight is in doubt, declare.

However, emergencies come in two basic flavors: distress and urgency. Distress conditions require immediate action. The engine has quit, or the airplane is on fire. Something must be done about it right now. These are easy decisions. Declare an emergency or make a mayday call and do whatever is necessary to get on the ground safely while ATC clears the way and sends help to your location.

Urgency conditions are less black-and-white. Something is wrong that has put the safe outcome of the flight in doubt. But what's required is careful consideration rather than immediate action. Maybe it's a warning light, or a fuel gauge indicating a little lower than you'd like. Maybe you're unsure of your position, or the ceilings are dropping too low for comfort. Or maybe it's just that feeling in the seat of your pants that something is not right with the airplane.

The controller can't fly the airplane for you, but they can definitely help with some of the tools you might need to manage the safe outcome of the flight. Maybe it's a vector to a nearby airport, or a PIREP from an aircraft ahead, that saves the day.

The most important part of this is that the sooner you communicate the information, the sooner ATC can mobilize whatever resources are necessary to assist you. You can use the term urgency if you want, or simply say the E-word and work it out later.

As pilots, our egos sometimes prevent us from confessing our mistakes and getting the help we really need. I'd rather confess and say, *'Hey, I need some help here,'* before the situation progresses beyond the point where ATC can do anything to assist."

