

Aid for Judging the Apparent Size of Aircraft


Print this sheet, cut out the 3 X 5 reference card, and fold it in half on the dotted line. Measure the calibration mark on the bottom and see if it measures one inch. View the card from 18 inches if the line measures one inch. If not, multiply the standard viewing distance (18") by the length of the line. That should be your correct viewing distance for the card (example: line length = 0.8 inches. $18 \times 0.8 = 14.4$ "; In this case your viewing distance would be 14.4 inches).

Know what to look for!


Approximate appearance of an airliner
and a small single engine aircraft

(view at a distance of 18")


2 Miles




1 Mile



1/2 Mile





← Fold Here

To quickly detect traffic, pilots should know the apparent size of aircraft at various distances. This card can be used as a reference in the cockpit and to help pilots learn target size.

To view the card, hold it at a distance of 18 inches from the eyes. The sizes of the images approximate those produced by actual aircraft (a Cessna 172, and an Airbus 320). These aircraft were chosen as examples of small aircraft and airliners.

Note that the actual appearance and visibility of real aircraft will vary with color, weather, direction of travel, type of aircraft and other factors.

Developed by Dr. Michael Crognale; Send any questions or comments regarding this aid to: Dr. Crognale (mikro@unr.edu); or The Federal Aviation Administration, General Aviation and Commercial Division; (AFS-800), Room 835, 800 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, DC 20591, Phone: 202-267-8212; or General Aviation Human Factors Program Manager (william.krebs@faa.gov).

Cut Out 


1 inch

Calibration