



Worksheet 1: Overcoming fear

The first jump from an aeroplane is a jittery nightmare of fear. More than likely, the act of jumping out of a perfectly good aeroplane with a heavy parachute on one's back generates more real fear than anything, short of armed combat.

The teaching method in fashion when I made my first jump, almost ten years ago, involved crawling out of an open door of an aircraft and hanging from the wingstrut. The jumpmaster calculated the force of the wind against an airspeed of over a hundred kilometres an hour, and added in a nine-hundred metre drop. He shouted at the student to let go of the strut at the point where all these variables might combine to deposit him or her in the centre of the drop zone.

On that first jump I was the second student out of the plane. A young woman went first, and when she reluctantly let go, I saw her body hurtle down through empty space like a sack of cement. When she let go of the strut, gravity tilted her over into an exaggerated belly flop – arms straight out and slightly above the head, legs held just above the back – spread-eagled like a frog. She was already a tiny speck before the static line attached to the plane pulled the parachute open for her. From far above it looked like one of those flowers blooming in time-lapse photography in a nature documentary.

The plane circled around, and it was my turn to confront the fear of falling. The jumpmaster had stressed the importance of holding my back arched. When the jumpmaster judged that I was in the proper position he shouted 'Go!'. This was a command I obeyed with extreme reluctance. The plane disappeared overhead. I held position from the waist up, but my legs were moving at a flat-out pace. I think, looking back on it, that my fear, ignoring the hard facts of physics, was screaming, 'Run or you'll die!'

Nevertheless, I didn't go into much of a spin. The chute opened splendidly, and I floated slowly to earth in an utter silence punctuated only by the bass drumbeat of my heart. It didn't matter that I'd failed to hold position. The point of the first jump is simply doing it. The niceties come later, if the student decides there is going to be a later. Jumping once is about defeating fear rather than demonstrating skill, boldly breaking through the bars and escaping the confines we set for ourselves. Afterwards, my skydiving classmates and I were giddy and ecstatic, like a group of children getting off a roller coaster, with an excitement fuelled by a sense of accomplishment.

Some of my classmates who went on to further jumps might have been looking to recapture that first incredible adrenaline rush – as I know I was – but this is a process of diminishing returns. As the novice becomes accustomed to the fear, the thought process changes gradually. During the first jump you think – 'I know thousands have done it before, but this time it's me, and I'm going to die.' This gives way to a more casual attitude – 'Okay, some people have been injured, some have even been killed, but I'm careful, and that'll never happen to me.'

My experience suggests that the novice skydiver discovers, over the next few jumps, that one can never feel again that first thrill of pure and primal fear. He or she also learns to appreciate the skill involved in skydiving, and begins to understand that the mechanics of flying are pleasurable in themselves. This is the reason some people become hooked on the sport. The woman I watched fall off the strut that day nearly a decade ago has now logged over a thousand jumps.

Worksheet 2: Checklist *Overcoming fear*



1. Read the checklist of ideas in column 1 – these are the main points from the text covering **what students will need to do on their first jump**.
2. **Tick** in column 2 to show you have included the ideas that are relevant to your bullet points.
3. In column 3, list **detail(s)** you could use **from the text** to support each main point. This could be a quote or a paraphrase of the language used.
4. In column 4, based on the evidence in the text, **suggest** what the jumpmaster **might say** as further explanation to extend or develop each idea.

Idea / information about	Used	Detail(s) from text	Your suggested development:
carrying parachute			
timing / sequence			
move out of airplane			
wing strut			
command from jumpmaster			
position			
freefall			
opening of parachute			
fear			

positive feelings about jumping			
learning			
skydiving more than once			