

The ATC system: who owns what

Structure, not phraseology: every facility a VFR pilot talks to, in flight order — what it owns, what it does for you, and when calling is the regulation versus good practice. **Required** contacts quote the rule itself; **advised** contacts quote the AIM, and the two never share a style.

1 · Clearance Delivery FAA GUIDANCE

Owens: No airspace and no surface — a relief frequency the tower adds where traffic warrants, so clearances and departure instructions come off the ground frequency. **For VFR:** At busier towered fields: departure instructions, a beacon code, and the frequency to call after takeoff, before you ever taxi.

- “Normally, only one ground control frequency is assigned at an airport; however, at locations where the amount of traffic so warrants, a second ground control frequency and/or another frequency designated as a clearance delivery frequency, may be assigned.”
- AIM 4-3-14

ADVISED — AIM First call of the day at a towered field, before engine start, on whichever of ground or clearance delivery the field publishes.

- “Pilots of departing aircraft should communicate with the control tower on the appropriate ground control/clearance delivery frequency prior to starting engines to receive engine start time, taxi and/or clearance information.”
- AIM 4-3-14

2 · Ground Control REGULATION

Owens: The movement area — taxiways and runway crossings at a towered field. It is a position in the tower cab, not a separate building. **For VFR:** Taxi instructions to and from the runway, runway crossings, and progressive taxi if you ask for it.

- “They are used for issuance of taxi information, clearances, and other necessary contacts between the tower and aircraft or other vehicles operated on the airport.”
- AIM 4-3-14

REQUIRED — 14 CFR Before moving on a runway or taxiway at any airport with an operating control tower — a clearance is the rule, not a courtesy.

- “No person may, at any airport with an operating control tower, operate an aircraft on a runway or taxiway, or take off or land an aircraft, unless an appropriate clearance is received from ATC.”
- § 91.129(i)

ADVISED — AIM Stay with ground through taxi and run-up; go to tower only when ready for takeoff.

- “Unless otherwise advised by the tower, remain on that frequency during taxiing and runup, then change to local control frequency when ready to request takeoff clearance.”
- AIM 4-3-14

3 · Tower (local control) REGULATION

Owens: The runways and the surface area around the airport — Class D, or the surface piece of Class B or C — for a safe, orderly flow of traffic. **For VFR:** Takeoff and landing clearances, pattern sequencing, and traffic in the pattern.

- “Towers have been established to provide for a safe, orderly and expeditious flow of traffic on and in the vicinity of an airport.”
- AIM 4-1-2

REQUIRED — 14 CFR Two-way radio communications with the tower, any time you operate to, from, through, or on an airport whose tower is up. (§ 91.126 is written for Class G fields — its (a) says so; D, C and B fields reach the same rules by incorporation: § 91.129(a) folds in §§ 91.126–91.127 for Class D, and § 91.130(a) and § 91.131(a) fold in § 91.129 for C and B.)

- “Unless otherwise authorized or required by ATC, no person may operate an aircraft to, from, through, or on an airport having an operational control tower unless two-way radio communications are maintained between that aircraft and the control tower. Communications must be established prior to 4 nautical miles from the airport, up to and including 2,500 feet AGL.”
- § 91.126(d)

ADVISED — AIM Make the first call well outside the surface area — the AIM’s own number is about 15 miles. (The AIM’s surrounding sentence restates the two-way-contact requirement — that rule is the § 91.126(d) quote above, not this advisory line.)

- “Initial callup should be made about 15 miles from the airport.”
- AIM 4-3-2

4 · Approach / Departure (TRACON) REGULATION

Owens: The terminal airspace around busier airports — the Class B or C shelves and the arrival/departure corridors between the tower’s surface area and the en route structure. **For VFR:** Sequencing into busy terminal areas, traffic advisories, and — where a program exists — landing information for VFR arrivals before tower handoff.

- “In addition to the use of radar for the control of IFR aircraft, all commissioned radar facilities provide the following basic radar services for VFR aircraft: Safety alerts. Traffic advisories. Limited radar vectoring (on a workload permitting basis). Sequencing at locations where procedures have been established for this purpose and/or when covered by a Letter of Agreement.”
- AIM 4-1-18

REQUIRED — 14 CFR Class C: two-way radio communications established before entering, and maintained inside.

- “Each person must establish two-way radio communications with the ATC facility (including foreign ATC in the case of foreign airspace designated in the United States) providing air traffic services prior to entering that airspace and thereafter maintain those communications while within that airspace.”
- § 91.130(c)(1)

REQUIRED — 14 CFR Class B: not just radio contact — an ATC clearance, received before you are in.

- “The operator must receive an ATC clearance from the ATC facility having jurisdiction for that area before operating an aircraft in that area.”
- § 91.131(a)(1)

ADVISED — AIM VFR arrival at a field with an approach-control program: call approach for landing information before the tower.

- “Numerous approach control facilities have established programs for arriving VFR aircraft to contact approach control for landing information. [...] Compliance with this procedure is not mandatory but pilot participation is encouraged.”
- AIM 4-1-8

5 · Center (ARTCC) FAA GUIDANCE

Owens: The en route structure between terminal areas — most of the chart, wherever no TRACON owns the sky. **For VFR:** En route flight following — radar traffic advisories, workload permitting — over stretches with no approach control below.

- “Centers are established primarily to provide air traffic service to aircraft operating on IFR flight plans within controlled airspace, and principally during the en route phase of flight.”
- AIM 4-1-1

ADVISED — AIM VFR en route in Class E or G: no call is required — traffic advisories exist when requested, and only when requested.

- “Traffic information may be provided to flights not operating on IFR flight plans when requested by pilots of such flights.”
- AIM 4-1-15

6 · Flight Service (FSS) FAA GUIDANCE

Owens: No airspace at all. FSS is an air traffic facility, but it controls nothing — it briefs, files, relays, and searches. **For VFR:** Preflight briefings, flight plan filing/opening/closing, en route advisories, and search and rescue when a flight plan goes unclosed.

- “Flight Service Stations (FSSs) are air traffic facilities that provide pilot briefings, flight plan processing, en route flight advisories, search and rescue services, and assistance to lost aircraft and aircraft in emergency situations.”
- AIM 4-1-3

ADVISED — AIM For briefings, flight plans, and relays — never for a clearance of its own. When FSS passes you a clearance, it is relaying ATC’s.

- “FSSs also relay ATC clearances, process Notices to Airmen, and broadcast aviation weather and aeronautical information.”
- AIM 4-1-3

7 · UNICOM / CTAF FAA GUIDANCE

Owens: Nothing — nobody controls a non-towered airport. UNICOM is, in the Pilot/Controller Glossary’s words, “a nongovernment communication facility which may provide airport information at certain airports”; the CTAF is a frequency, not a facility. **For VFR:** A common frequency where pilots

announce position and intentions, and a UNICOM operator (if staffed) can pass airport information.

- “A CTAF is a frequency designated for the purpose of carrying out airport advisory practices while operating to or from an airport without an operating control tower. The CTAF may be a UNICOM, MULTICOM, FSS, or tower frequency and is identified in appropriate aeronautical publications.”
- AIM 4-1-9

ADVISED — AIM Approaching or departing any airport without an operating tower: broadcast and listen on the CTAF. No rule scripts this — the AIM calls it essential.

- “It is essential that pilots be alert and look for other traffic and exchange traffic information when approaching or departing an airport without an operating control tower.”
- AIM 4-1-9

8 · VFR flight following — what the sources actually call it **FAA GUIDANCE**

The glossary defines flight following by reference: FLIGHT FOLLOWING points to TRAFFIC ADVISORIES, and TRAFFIC INFORMATION points to the same entry. The AIM paragraph describing that radar traffic-advisory service is 4-1-15, Radar Traffic Information Service — its own text calls it VFR radar advisory service. In terminal airspace, AIM 4-1-18's basic radar service packages the same traffic advisories for VFR aircraft. The phrase “flight following” appears nowhere in the frozen AIM section itself — only in the glossary.

- “FLIGHT FOLLOWING - See TRAFFIC ADVISORIES”
- Pilot/Controller Glossary, letter F
- “TRAFFIC ADVISORIES - Advisories issued to alert pilots to other known or observed air traffic which may be in such proximity to the position or intended route of flight of their aircraft to warrant their attention.”
- Pilot/Controller Glossary, letter T
- “TRAFFIC INFORMATION - See TRAFFIC ADVISORIES”
- Pilot/Controller Glossary, letter T
- “This is a service provided by radar ATC facilities. Pilots receiving this service are advised of any radar target observed on the radar display which may be in such proximity to the position of their aircraft or its intended route of flight that it warrants their attention. This service is not intended to relieve the pilot of the responsibility for continual vigilance to see and avoid other aircraft. [...] VFR radar advisory service does not include vectors away from conflicting traffic unless requested by the pilot. When advisory service is no longer desired, advise the controller before changing frequencies and then change your transponder code to 1200, if applicable.”
- AIM 4-1-15, Radar Traffic Information Service
- “Many factors, such as limitations of the radar, volume of traffic, controller workload and communications frequency congestion, could prevent the controller from providing this service.”
- AIM 4-1-15
- “Traffic advisory service will be provided to the extent possible depending on higher priority duties of the controller or other limitations; e.g., radar limitations, volume of traffic, frequency congestion, or controller workload.”
- P/CG TRAFFIC ADVISORIES, Note 2

CHECKRIDE TRAP **TECHNIQUE** **Honest limits:** What it is not: separation, a clearance, or vectors. The service is advisory, given at the controller's discretion when workload allows, terminated by either side, and it never relieves you of see-and-avoid. Being on flight following does not by itself satisfy any airspace entry rule in the table above.

9 · Lost comms, VFR — what the rules do and do not say **REGULATION**

- “(a) General. Unless otherwise authorized by ATC, each pilot who has two-way radio communications failure when operating under IFR shall comply with the rules of this section.”
- § 91.185(a)
- “It is virtually impossible to provide regulations and procedures applicable to all possible situations associated with two-way radio communications failure.”
- AIM 6-4-1
- “If an aircraft with a coded radar beacon transponder experiences a loss of two-way radio capability, the pilot should adjust the transponder to reply on Mode A/3, Code 7600.”
- AIM 6-4-2
- “However, if the aircraft radio fails in flight, the pilot in command may operate that aircraft and land if weather conditions are at or above basic VFR weather minimums, visual contact with the tower is maintained, and a clearance to land is received.”
- § 91.126(d)
- “(2) If the aircraft radio fails in flight under VFR, the pilot in command may operate that aircraft and land if—
- (i) Weather conditions are at or above basic VFR weather minimums;
- (ii) Visual contact with the tower is maintained; and
- (iii) A clearance to land is received.”
- § 91.129(d)(2)

CHECKRIDE TRAP **TECHNIQUE** Read § 91.185(a)'s own first sentence: the lost-comms procedure everyone memorizes is scoped to IFR. For VFR flight, the regulations prescribe no route, altitude, or timing procedure after a radio failure. What the sources actually give a VFR pilot is narrow: squawk 7600 so radar facilities see the failure (AIM guidance, not regulation), and a quoted path to land where a tower is up — § 91.126(d) as written for Class G fields, § 91.129(d)(2) in the same words for Class D, reaching Class C and B through the incorporation chain the tower band documents: basic VFR weather minimums, visual contact with the tower, and a clearance to land. Without a radio, that clearance arrives by light signal; the § 91.125 light-gun table lives on the VFR Quick Reference card, not here.

Sources, kept apart. “Required” entries quote 14 CFR at eCFR issue date 2026-08-24 — the rule. “Advised” entries and facility descriptions quote the AIM and the Pilot/Controller Glossary — guidance, not regulation. Retrieved 2026-08-31 (14 CFR, AIM chap4) / 2026-09-01 (AIM chap6 sec4, P/CG); every artifact is frozen and hashed in the repository. This is a study aid — verify against the primary source before you act on it. The light-gun signal table is on the VFR Quick Reference card at runuplab.com/printables/vfr-quick-reference; airspace entry rules and VFR minimums are on the Airspace sheet at runuplab.com/printables/airspace.