

# Your conspiracy theories about Southwest's boarding policy are wrong

James Bikales : 8-9 minutes : 9/8/2022

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correction

A previous version of this article incorrectly said Southwest Airlines assigns boarding positions with letters A, B and C and a number between 1 and 50. The number assignments are from 1 to 60. The article has been corrected.

Regular Southwest Airlines fliers have probably been there: You set an alarm and check in exactly 24 hours before your flight, only to find yourself relegated to boarding Group C — often known as being short for “center seat.”

Southwest is the only major U.S. airline with an open seating policy. It assigns every passenger an exact boarding position — a letter between A and C and a number between 1 and 60 — and allows them to choose any available seat once on board. That means boarding order on Southwest isn't just about space for carry-ons; it could be the difference between an aisle seat on the exit row and the middle seat of the back row.

Twitter is filled with not-so-humble brags from travelers who secured a coveted A-group boarding pass, as well as the grumblings of those who got stuck in Group C, including some who say they checked in the moment they could.

Factors such as whether you use the Southwest app to check in, being a frequent-flier member (other than elite members), the size of your group and purpose of travel are not factored into boarding position assignments, said Laura Swift, a Southwest spokeswoman.

Still, getting into the A group is not just about the time you check in: [Boarding assignments on Southwest](#) are determined by a combination of money, timing, status and pure chance.

“It's surprisingly complicated,” said Brett Snyder, who runs the [Cranky Flier](#) consumer air travel blog, noting some aspects of the boarding assignments on Southwest remain a “black box,” even to travel experts.

Here's why checking in 24 hours before your flight might not get you the boarding position you want — and what you can do to secure an earlier spot.

## **A1-A15 are guaranteed**

The only way to guarantee an early boarding position is to pay. Purchasing or upgrading to a Business Select ticket — Southwest's [most expensive fare class](#) — guarantees an

A1-A15 boarding position.

If there are fewer than 15 Business Select passengers on the flight, the remaining slots in the A1-A15 group are sold beginning 24 hours ahead of the flight as [Upgraded Boarding](#) positions, starting at \$30 per flight. The price varies based on “popularity and length of each flight segment,” according to Southwest’s website. While previously available only at the gate, in August the company [added the option](#) to purchase Upgraded Boarding upon check-in on its app and website.

For frequent fliers with the Rapid Rewards Priority or Rapid Rewards Performance Business credit cards, the airline will reimburse up to four Upgraded Boardings purchased with the cards per year.

Keep in mind, though, that being first to board doesn’t guarantee the best seat because Southwest operates “through” flights, meaning passengers from a previous leg might still be on board, and they are allowed to change seats (after flight attendants take a head count).

“You may even have A1, and you may not be the first person on that airplane,” Snyder said.

## **You can pay to be checked in early**

Even if you check in exactly 24 hours ahead, it’s likely you won’t be the first passenger assigned a boarding position. That’s because Southwest offers “[EarlyBird](#)” check-in, which automatically reserves a boarding position for the passenger 36 hours ahead of departure for a fee. You’ll still need to check in to get your boarding pass, but your boarding position — probably in the A group — will already be secured.

Some fliers get EarlyBird check-in included with their purchase: those who pay for an [Anytime fare](#), and [elite members](#) in Southwest’s frequent-flier program (A-List Preferred or A-List status), along with their companions. EarlyBird check-in can also be purchased for \$15 to \$25, depending on the flight.

Gary Leff, who runs the travel blog [View From the Wing](#), recommends that if you’re traveling with others, one person can purchase EarlyBird check-in and save seats for the rest of the party. Southwest does not have a policy against saving seats, though it can spark conflict between passengers.

Several categories of passengers can board at designated times, which typically ensures a good seat. Passengers with disabilities can preboard, while [active-duty military](#) personnel, elite members in Southwest’s frequent-flier program who do not already have EarlyBird check-in (if they booked their flight at the last minute, for example) and families with a child under 6 can board between the A and B groups.

“If you have little kids, it’s probably not worth it to buy EarlyBird because you’ll really not have much trouble finding seats together,” Snyder said.

## Seconds matter if you don't want to pay

Beyond those groups, boarding positions become strictly first come, first served — down to the second you check in.

“As far as we know, when you're doing regular check-in, it is strictly in order of when you click the button,” Snyder said. “It does matter to the second — you just have to be ahead of everyone else.”

Snyder said he generally doesn't buy EarlyBird when he's traveling alone because he can usually secure a non-middle seat with regular check-in.

“If I check in myself right at 24 hours, I'm probably going to get nothing above the low B area,” he said.

Though he recommends checking in as close to 24 hours out as possible, Snyder said passengers who can check in closer to the flight can occasionally take the boarding position of another passenger who canceled at the last minute.

“Sometimes you can slide in there and get a surprisingly good number that you don't expect,” he said. “But there's no way to know that in advance, so always try to check in right at 24 hours.”

Swift, the Southwest spokeswoman, said that there are “several factors incorporated during the boarding process” and that the airline could not guarantee a passenger would take the position of another who canceled.

Leff said there are websites that automate the check-in process at exactly 24 hours, but most have been shut down by the airline. Swift said Southwest “doesn't use third-party apps” and encouraged passengers to use the airline's website or app to check in.

## How to find the 'golden seat'

So you've been assigned a coveted A boarding position, and you enter the plane with your pick of seats — which should you go for?

Leff said his top priority is securing an empty middle seat next to him, so he will often check with the gate agent before boarding to see if there will be any empty seats.

If the plane is not full, he skips the empty aisle seats near the front that many passengers want and heads for an aisle seat about two-thirds of the way down the plane.

“Nobody's necessarily going to try to go all the way to the back looking for a middle — if you get stuck with the middle, you're probably taking it close to the front,” Leff said.

On a full flight, however, every middle seat will be filled, so Leff said he goes straight for the “infinite legroom” seat, the [window seat behind the exit row](#), which is missing a seat in front of it. Snyder called it Southwest's “golden seat.”

Leff said the single most important factor in securing your desired seat is arriving at the gate 30 minutes before your flight.

“If you’re flying on another airline that has assigned seating, and you’re not trying to fight for overhead bin space, it sort of doesn’t matter when you board as long as you’re there before they close the boarding door,” he said. “But Southwest turns that on its head — if your boarding number is A20, well, that doesn’t help you if they’re already boarding the C’s when you show up at the gate.”

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