

True Crime English Lesson: The Man Who Vanished into Thin Air

Level: Upper-Intermediate (B2) to Advanced (C1)

Topic: The Unsolved Mystery of D.B. Cooper

Part 1: The Reading Text

The Skyjacking of Flight 305

I. The Nondescript Passenger

It was the afternoon of November 24, 1971—Thanksgiving Eve. A man calling himself Dan Cooper approached the flight counter of Northwest Orient Airlines in Portland, Oregon. He purchased a one-way ticket to Seattle, Washington. Cooper was a quiet man, dressed in a dark business suit, a crisp white shirt, and a black tie. He looked like any other businessman travelling for the holidays. He boarded Flight 305, a Boeing 727, and took seat 18C. He ordered a bourbon and soda, lit a cigarette, and waited. To the flight attendants, he seemed completely **unassuming**.

II. The Note and the Bomb

Shortly after takeoff, Cooper handed a note to Florence Schaffner, the nearest flight attendant. Thinking he was just another lonely businessman trying to give her his phone number, she dropped it unopened into her purse. Cooper leaned toward her and whispered, "Miss, you'd better look at that note. I have a bomb."

Stunned, Schaffner read the note. It was printed in neat, all-capital letters. Cooper demanded \$200,000 in "negotiable American currency," four parachutes, and a fuel truck standing by in Seattle to refuel the plane upon arrival. He opened his briefcase just enough for her to see red cylinders and wires. He was calm, polite, and dangerously serious.

III. The Exchange

The pilots communicated the demands to the authorities. The airline, fearing for the

passengers' lives, authorized the payment. When the plane landed in Seattle, a tense exchange took place. Cooper allowed the 36 passengers and Schaffner to leave the plane in exchange for the money and the parachutes. However, he kept several crew members on board as hostages.

He ordered the pilot to fly towards Mexico City, but with specific, unusual instructions: the plane must fly below 10,000 feet, the landing gear must remain down, and the cabin must remain unpressurized. He was clearly knowledgeable about aviation.

IV. The Leap into Oblivion

Somewhere over the dense, stormy forests of Washington State, while the crew was locked in the cockpit, a warning light flashed. The rear staircase of the Boeing 727 had been lowered. At approximately 8:00 PM, into a freezing rainstorm with temperatures of -7 degrees Celsius, D.B. Cooper jumped from the aircraft with the money strapped to his body.

V. The Vanishing Act

When the plane landed, Cooper was gone. Despite one of the most extensive manhunts in FBI history, he was never found. In 1980, a young boy found a rotting package containing \$5,800 of the ransom money buried in a riverbank, but the rest remains missing. Did he survive the fall? Did he escape with the fortune? Or did the wilderness claim him? To this day, D.B. Cooper remains the only hijacker in U.S. aviation history who was never caught.

Part 2: The Psychology of Human Behavior

Topic: The "Anti-Hero" Appeal (Romanticizing Crime)

Why is D.B. Cooper often remembered as a "cool" figure rather than a villain?

This phenomenon can be explained by the psychological concept of **Romanticizing the Anti-Hero**. Even though Cooper committed a serious felony (hijacking and extortion), the public was fascinated by his style.

1. **Non-Violent Approach:** He was polite, didn't hurt anyone physically, and even insisted on paying for his drinks.
2. **Beating the System:** He targeted a large corporation (an airline) rather than individuals, which makes some people view the crime as "victimless."
3. **Audacity:** The sheer bravery required to jump out of a plane into a storm creates a sense of awe.

People often compartmentalize the crime: they condemn the act of hijacking, but admire the planning and the daring escape.

Part 3: Key Vocabulary

1. **Nondescript (adj.):** Lacking distinctive or interesting features or characteristics; ordinary.
 - *Synonym:* Unremarkable / Dull
2. **Unassuming (adj.):** Not pretentious or arrogant; modest.
 - *Synonym:* Humble / Low-key
3. **Negotiable (adj.):** (In finance) Open to discussion or modification; (of currency) able to be transferred to another owner.
 - *Synonym:* Transferable / Valid
4. **Extensive (adj.):** Covering or affecting a large area.
 - *Synonym:* Widespread / Comprehensive
5. **Oblivion (noun):** The state of being unaware or unconscious of what is happening; or the state of being completely forgotten.
 - *Synonym:* Nothingness / Void
6. **Manhunt (noun):** An organized search for a person, especially a criminal.
 - *Synonym:* Pursuit / Search operation
7. **Audacity (noun):** A willingness to take bold risks.
 - *Synonym:* Daring / Bravery

Part 4: Grammar Spotlight

Target Structure: Past Perfect Continuous

Had + been + V-ing

Quote from text: "He **had been sitting** quietly, drinking his bourbon, before he handed the note to the stewardess." (Adapted from context for grammar focus).

Explanation:

We use the **Past Perfect Continuous** to describe an action that was happening over a period of time *before* another action in the past.

- **Action 1 (Duration):** He had been sitting / He had been planning.
- **Action 2 (Interruption/Event):** He handed the note / He jumped.

In mystery storytelling, this tense is crucial for setting the scene and explaining what led up to the main event. It adds depth to the timeline.

- *Example:* "The FBI realized that Cooper **had been planning** this jump for months."
-

Part 5: Student Activity

Task: Vocabulary & Context Check

Fill in the blanks with the correct word from the "Key Vocabulary" list above. Make sure to use the correct form.

1. The detectives launched a massive _____ across three states to find the escaped prisoner.
2. The witness described the suspect as a _____ man in a grey suit; he looked like everyone else.
3. She had the _____ to ask for a raise on her very first day of work!
4. After the scandal, the famous actor faded into _____ and was never heard from again.
5. The damage from the earthquake was _____, destroying nearly every building in the city.
6. He was a quiet, _____ man who never bragged about his achievements.
7. The kidnappers demanded _____ currency so they could use the money immediately without being traced.

Answer Key

1. **Manhunt**
2. **Nondescript**
3. **Audacity**
4. **Oblivion**
5. **Extensive**
6. **Unassuming**
7. **Negotiable**