

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Frank Abagnale

By CommonLit Staff

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*Frank Abagnale (born 1948) lived a life of deception, conning people for years in order to gain money and power. When he was eventually caught and arrested, he only had to serve five years before the FBI decided to let him out early to help them identify other cases of fraud. As you read the article below, consider what makes someone who they are—both figuratively and in the eyes of the law.*

- [1] Frank William Abagnale, Jr. is an American security consultant who is famous for his former identity as a con-artist, check forger,<sup>1</sup> impostor, and escape artist. He claims to have assumed eight different false identities in his life, successfully impersonating an airline pilot, a doctor, a U.S. Bureau of Prisons agent, and a lawyer. He was the target of a long-running and frustrating FBI investigation during his career as an impostor, and he escaped from police custody (once from a plane taxiing on the runway, and once from a U.S. federal prison) before he was 21 years old. He served fewer than five years in prison and then began to work for the United States government; he currently works for the FBI and runs Abagnale & Associates, a financial fraud consultancy company. ;



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Frank Abagnale was born in Bronxville, New York, and lived there until he was sixteen. His first con victim was his father, who gave him a gasoline credit card and a truck when he was fifteen, so that he could get to and from his part-time job. Instead of using the card to buy gas as intended, Abagnale used it to buy tires, batteries, and other products at gas stations and then sold the products to people for cash. His father was liable for a bill of \$3,400 for all the products Abagnale charged to the card.

Abagnale's next tricks focused mostly on cashing personal checks for money that was not in fact in his bank account. This never works for long at a single bank, so he began to open other accounts at different banks, eventually adopting several different identities to enable this. Abagnale's cons grew in scale and sophistication. He became very skilled over time, and he devised a variety of schemes for defrauding banks. ;

1. A check forger is someone who writes false checks to steal money.

As his crimes became increasingly serious, Abagnale went on the run and adopted a variety of false names and identities to evade police. He impersonated a pilot because he wanted to fly throughout the world for free; he procured himself a Pan American World Airways (Pan Am) uniform, and created a false pilot's ID and a false pilot's license. Pan Am estimated that between the ages of 16 and 18, Abagnale flew on over 250 flights and to 26 countries with his false pilot identity. He also stayed at hotels and ate most of his meals billed to the airline during these years. He never actually flew a plane but was always "deadheading" or supporting the primary pilot on the flight.

- [5] Another ambitious false identity Abagnale assumed was that of a doctor; for nearly a year, he impersonated a chief resident pediatrician<sup>2</sup> in a Georgia hospital. The position was possible for Abagnale because as a supervisor he was not expected to do real medical work. He was able to convincingly fake his way through his days by allowing the medical interns to handle the cases that came in during his shifts. He left the hospital after several close call incidents in which he realized he could put lives at risk because of his lack of medical expertise. Abagnale went on to impersonate a teacher and a lawyer as well, using similar strategies of forging his credentials and crafting a new identity with a new name and personal back story.

Abagnale was eventually caught in France in 1969 when an Air France flight attendant he dated previously recognized him and notified the police. When the French police arrested him, 12 different countries revealed charges of fraud against him. He was deported to the United States but escaped from the plane as it was taxiing on the runway New York's JFK International Airport. He was recaptured in Canada and handed over to the U.S. Border Patrol. In April 1971, Abagnale reportedly escaped again from the Federal Detention Center in Atlanta, Georgia, while awaiting trial. He was captured and imprisoned again, and in 1974, after he had served less than five years of his 12-year prison sentence, the United States federal government released him on the condition that he help the federal government to investigate crimes of fraud.

Since his release from prison, Abagnale has also appeared in a number of TV shows as a celebrity con man. In 1980, Abagnale wrote the book *Catch Me If You Can*, based on his life story. The book was adapted into a 2002 film of the same name, directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Abagnale. The film was a financial and critical success, and the real Abagnale reacted positively to it. As the ending credits of the movie reveal, Frank has been happily married for 26 years, has three sons, lives in the Midwest, has caught some of the world's most elusive money forgers, and, although he does not receive money for the film's profits, Abagnale earns millions of dollars each year because of his work creating unforgeable checks.

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2. **Pediatrician** (*noun*): a doctor who specializes in child-patient care

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. One of the central ideas of the text is that Abagnale was able to assume multiple identities as a con-artist. What is another idea that is central to the text? [RI.2]
  - A. Abagnale acknowledged that he was putting lives at risk as a fake doctor and assumed a new identity.
  - B. Even when captured, Abagnale managed to escape several times.
  - C. Abagnale was able to capitalize on his past felonies, turning his life-story into more profit than his cons, namely with the movie *Catch Me If You Can*.
  - D. Abagnale was eventually able to utilize his skills as a former con-artist on the other side of the law and to his own (legal) success.
  
2. What does the word “liable” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 2? [RI.4]
  - A. Guilty
  - B. Responsible
  - C. Likely
  - D. Granted
  
3. Reread the beginning of paragraph 5; the author describes another of Abagnale’s false identities as “ambitious.” How does this word choice develop the audience’s view of Abagnale? [RI.5]
  - A. It portrays him in a positive light as someone who has reformed himself.
  - B. It portrays Abagnale as greedy and arrogant.
  - C. It presents Abagnale as aspiring, though short-sighted, given the context of his ambition.
  - D. It presents Abagnale as motivated, though perhaps reckless, given the context of his ambition.
  
4. Which of the following statements best describes how Abagnale was able to impersonate several different identities so convincingly? [RI.3]
  - A. He expertly forged I.D.s and credentials.
  - B. He stole other people’s identities and made them his own.
  - C. He let other people do his work for him.
  - D. He bribed people in order to get away with his crimes.

5. How did Abagnale change, if at all, after his five-year prison stay? Support your answer with evidence from the text. [RI.3] [RI.1]

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