Would you like significantly cheaper airline tickets over the holiday break? There is a little unknown trick to getting discounted tickets, and it works year-round too! Deeply rooted in the airline industry is a strategy that dates back several decades to the heyday of travel agencies. I am referring to the sales that airlines put up weekly, usually starting late Monday evening through Friday morning. Even though the regular, sometimes significant price swings can be aggravating at best, the industry has a good reason for doing it. On the positive side we can predict price drops and take advantage of the deals, but not without first understanding how it works and navigating around any frustrations and traps.

A brief, but extremely interesting history of the mid-week sales answers many questions about the purpose of the price slashing. In the early days of traveling by plane, up until the advent of online flight booking firms, the most common way of purchasing a ticket was through a travel agency at a physical location. During the weekends these agencies would make some of their sales, but would do it at a higher price. This is due to the fact that as flights were booked the tally of total remaining seats was unknown until the airlines would report back to the agencies on Monday morning. After the reports were complete, often times a large surplus of seats would be available yet. To counteract this, the firms would start large sales that would be announced Monday night and become active the next day. These discounts would bring in an influx of buyers, which in the end would hopefully fill the plane. By Thursday evening these sales would begin to expire and the process would start over the following Monday.

You may be wondering why these sales still happen today, after all most of the booking is done electronically and should be instant, right? This is correct, but not in its entirety. Even though much of the commerce is electronically managed the transactions are still audited on Mondays and the same process described before commences. This is no longer the whole story though. Along with gross fluctuations in supply and demand, airlines also use the dramatic price swings to make alterations in overall price. Say that one week a flight from Chicago to Atlanta is $300, the airline may reduce this price to $225 during their weekly sale, but as soon as the discount expires the price may suddenly be $375. The airlines use these sales to mask price changes, small or large. This allows them to monitor the consumer reactions and even competing airlines to the higher prices. The ability to set prices at a whim like this is characteristic of a Monopoly. If the increase brings in adverse results the discount will be that much larger the following week making the deal look that much more appealing.

At the end of the day a little bit of planning can go a long way. By booking far in advance and watching for the inevitable weekly discounts, a bundle can be saved. The price swings may be disheartening as the deal of the year found one week may not be that great deal the week after. Overall prices are unpredictable but in the end it is possible to come out on top compared to weekend and holiday rates.