



## The Gambler

### Introduction

“The Gambler,” a song written by Don Schlitz, was made famous by country singer Kenny Rogers in 1978. The song features a mysterious character—a lifelong gambler—whom the singer meets by chance on a train “bound for nowhere.” The gambler offers worldly advice, based on his experiences as a gambler, in exchange for a swig of whiskey and a cigarette.

In the song, gambling appears to be a metaphor for life. In facilitating the instructional strategies below, the teacher is advised to not draw attention to this immediately. If none of the students picks up on this, the teacher could then probe with questions such as, “So, how does this relate to our daily lives?” The questions in the first strategy are designed to get the students to reflect critically on issues and cultural assumptions related to gambling. It is important to let the students engage in the inquiry without imposing lessons to be learned. On the other hand, later in the process teachers should feel free to offer their own views as part of the discussion.

### The song lyrics

On a warm summer's eve  
On a train bound for nowhere  
I met up with the gambler  
We were both too tired to sleep  
So we took turns a-starin'  
Out the window at the darkness  
The boredom overtook us,  
And he began to speak

He said, "Son, I've made a life  
Out of readin' people's faces  
Knowin' what the cards were  
By the way they held their eyes  
So if you don't mind me sayin'  
I can see you're out of aces  
For a taste of your whiskey  
I'll give you some advice"

f you're gonna play the game, boy  
You gotta learn to play it right

You've got to know when to hold 'em  
Know when to fold 'em  
Know when to walk away  
And know when to run  
You never count your money  
When you're sittin' at the table  
There'll be time enough for counting

Every gambler knows  
That the secret to survivin'  
Is knowin' what to throw away  
And knowin' what to keep  
'Cause every hand's a winner  
And every hand's a loser  
And the best that you can hope for is to die  
In your sleep

And when he finished speakin'  
He turned back toward the window  
Crushed out his cigarette  
And faded off to sleep  
And somewhere in the darkness  
The gambler he broke even  
But in his final words  
I found an ace that I could keep

You've got to know when to hold 'em  
Know when to fold 'em  
Know when to walk away  
And know when to run  
You never count your money  
When you're sittin' at the table  
There'll be time enough for countin'  
When the dealin's done

When the dealin's done

### Instructional strategies

1. Ask students to listen to “[The Gambler](#)” then display or give them the [lyrics handout](#) and play it again. Facilitate a discussion about the song lyrics. You might use questions like those below.

- What line(s) in the song caught your attention? Why? What do they suggest to you? Do you agree or disagree with the message? Why?
- When the gambler says, “If you’re gonna play the game, boy, you gotta learn to play it right,” what is he getting at? Do you think he gives good advice? Explain.
- What do you think the gambler’s attitude is? Do you think he’s a good person? Why or why not?

## Instructional Outline