

Idioms related to gambling and casinos often sneak into everyday English conversations without us even noticing. One popular phrase is **"raise the stakes"**. Many English learners assume that this expression always involves money or gambling. But does it really? In this blog post, we'll explore the literal and figurative meanings of "raise the stakes," discuss how context helps decode idioms, and show how tone and register affect their use. We'll also mention some great resources like the MrQ online slots platform, the VOA Learning English website, and the podcast *Words and Their Stories* for idiom enthusiasts.

Literal Meaning: Raised Stakes in Casinos and Card Games

First, let's get a clear image of where the phrase comes from. The idiom *"raise the stakes"* literally refers to increasing the money or valuables risked during a gambling game—like poker or blackjack.

- In **casino** settings (like on the MrQ online slots or poker tables), "stakes" are what players put on the line.
- "Raising the stakes" in this context means betting more money or increasing the risk to win bigger rewards.

You know what's funny? for example:

Player A: I just raised the stakes to \$50. Player B: Wow, that's a big risk!

Here, the phrase is very literal—money is involved.

Figurative Meaning: A Risk Metaphor Beyond Money

But in everyday English, *"raise the stakes"* usually appears as a **figurative expression**. It means *increasing the risk, pressure, or consequences of a situation*, often to encourage someone to take action or to highlight seriousness.

It **does not always mean money**.

Examples of figurative use:

- *"By refusing to compromise, she raised the stakes in the negotiation."* (No money is explicitly involved, but the risk and pressure grow.)
- *"The new evidence raised the stakes for the investigators."* (The outcome becomes more serious or risky.)

This use is quite common in *workplace meetings, political debates, or sports commentary*—contexts that VOA Learning English often highlights in its lessons.

When It Sounds Weird:

Using "raise the stakes" just to mean "make something bigger" without implying risk or pressure sounds a bit odd.

Example:

✗ The company raised the stakes on their social media posts by adding more pictures.

This feels off because there's no metaphorical or literal increase in risk or consequence.



Using Context to Decode Idioms

Idioms like “raise the stakes” rely heavily on context to be understood correctly. ESL learners often make this mistake—assuming similar words mean the same across situations. To avoid confusion, always ask:

1. Is there a reference to gambling, money, or a contest here? (Literal)
2. Is there a situation involving risk, urgency, or consequences? (Figurative)
3. What tone is being used—casual chat or formal discussion?

For instance:

“The CEO raised the stakes by demanding better sales figures this quarter.”

This is figurative and generally formal to business contexts.

In contrast:

“When I raised the stakes in poker, my friends got nervous.”

This is casual and literal.

Tip: The VOA Learning English website offers excellent listening exercises to practice hearing idioms in different situations and registers.

Tone and Register: Casual vs Formal Use

“Raise the stakes” can fit both casual and formal conversations, but the surrounding language changes to suit the audience:

Casual Use Formal Use

“We raised the stakes at the game night by playing for snacks.”

— relaxed, informal, literal or figurative

“The company has raised the stakes in the industry by innovating new technology.”

— formal business context, figurative meaning

Note that the tone also affects understanding—idioms can sometimes seem too casual or informal for serious or academic documents.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

A frequent mistake ESL learners make is inserting money amounts or prices when the idiom appears without such context.

Wrong assumption example:



“She raised the stakes by \$1000.”

But if the original content doesn’t mention dollars or any price, that addition is unnecessary and incorrect.

In fact, many real phrases collected from office meetings or sports commentary, like those found in *Words and Their Stories*, show that the stakes can be reputational, emotional, or related to consequences instead of money.

Learn More About Casino and Card Idioms in Everyday English

If you’re intrigued by gambling-related language and want to learn more idioms beyond *raise the stakes*, here are some you’ll find useful:

- **Hold your cards close to your chest:** Keep your plans or thoughts secret (casual/formal).
- **Play your ace:** Use your best resource or skill strategically (casual).
- **Fold under pressure:** Give up when things become too difficult (formal).
- **Call someone’s bluff:** Challenge someone’s claim or threat to see if it’s true (casual/formal).

[poker face meaning](#)

The podcast *Words and Their Stories* often explores such idioms and their stories, helping you understand nuanced meanings.

Summary

- “Raise the stakes” literally means increasing money at risk in gambling but is often used figuratively as a *risk metaphor* in everyday English.
- It **does not always mean money**: stakes can be risks, pressure, or consequences.
- Context is everything—pay attention to the situation and tone to decode idioms correctly.
- This phrase works in both casual and formal registers with slight language adjustments.
- Resources like MrQ online slots (for literal gambling context), VOA Learning English (for listening practice), and *Words and Their Stories* (for idiom backgrounds) can help deepen your understanding.

Next time you hear “raise the stakes,” remember—it’s usually about more than just money!