

ISBN FAQs

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General

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 2](#)

Why should I use an ISBN?

If you are a publisher or bookseller it may be in your own interest as you want to sell books. If your books cannot be ordered and distributed by ISBN and if they are not listed in Books in Print-type listings you may find that your books do not sell. People will assume your books do not exist, and even if they do know they exist they may consider it too much of a bother to handle them since they will need to do so using full title and manual ordering.

Do I need to have an ISBN?

The international ISBN system does not impose any legal requirement to have an ISBN, and the ISBN conveys no legal or copyright protection. The use of ISBN is prescribed by law in some countries, however.

Do books need an ISBN if they are not going to be sold?

It is desirable that all books made publicly available, whether they are available for sale or on a gratis basis, are identified by ISBNs.

In our country the book-trade works mostly without computers. Do I nevertheless need ISBNs?

You do not need to have computers to make use of ISBN. The ISBN saves you and other people the bother of copying bibliographic records. Also, if you want to export your books they will have more chance of being accepted in bookshops and listed in books in print type listings if they have ISBNs.

Our country still lacks an efficient infrastructure in the book sector

ISBN is an ideal means of building the infrastructure and of catching up with other countries.

What is the structure of an ISBN?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 5](#)

An ISBN is a 13-digit number consisting of 5 parts:

1. **GS1 element:** Identifying the ISBN community, issued by GS1, currently 978 or 979.
2. **Registration group element:** Identifying the particular country, geographical region or language area participating in the ISBN system. This element may be between 1 and 5 digits in length.
3. **Registrant element:** Identifying the particular publisher or imprint. This element may be up to 7 digits in length.
4. **Publication element:** Identifying the particular edition and format of a specific title. This may be up to 6 digits in length.
5. **Check digit:** the final single digit that mathematically validates the rest of the number.

Where do I obtain ISBNs?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 14.3](#)

Where do I get an ISBN from?

The International ISBN Agency does not issue ISBNs (except to multi-national NGOs). ISBNs are available from the appropriate local agency for the region or country where the publisher is based. If you are applying for ISBN as a company or organisation it is immaterial in which country your company or organisation is **registered**, it is the location where your company or organisation is **based and operates from** that is the important criterion. If you have more than one site, possibly in more than one country, then ISBNs should be obtained based on where the headquarters of your organisation is situated. It also does not matter in which country your publications will be printed, manufactured, marketed or distributed – **only your location as publisher determines where you should obtain ISBNs.**

Details of the national agencies are available at: www.isbn-international.org/agencies.

My country has more than one ISBN agency, what should I do?

In some cases (e.g. Canada) there is more than one agency responsible in a country. Generally this is to support instances where there are different languages in common use in the country concerned. In these cases, you should choose which agency within the country to contact, based on the predominant language in which you will publish or in which you or your employees work and understand. However, ISBNs are not assigned on the basis of the language of the book.

My country does not have an ISBN agency responsible for it, what should I do?

Please contact the International ISBN Agency first as it may be that we have already made informal arrangements with an existing national agency to provide ISBNs on behalf of your country.

Separately, we also recommend that you contact the ministry of culture, or any association responsible for publishers or the book-trade, to inform them of the desire for the implementation of the ISBN system in your country.

My country has an ISBN agency but may I obtain my ISBNs from a different agency?

No. All publishers should apply to the appropriate agency that is responsible for the country in which they are based. If you have genuine reasons that may prevent you from applying to that agency then you should contact the International ISBN Agency for advice in the first instance but you should not contact another ISBN agency instead.

I am publishing a book in a foreign language. Should it have an ISBN of the country in whose language the book is written?

No. It is the country in which the publisher is based which determines the group identifier, and not the language of the text.

Who is a publisher?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual section 3.16](#)

I am not a publisher; can I still obtain an ISBN?

Yes. For our purposes, a publisher is the group, organisation, company or individual who is responsible for initiating the production of a publication. Normally, it is also the person or body who bears the cost/financial risk in making a product available.

Please remember that in a number of countries there is detailed legislation regarding publishing.

My printer offered to arrange an ISBN for my book. Is that OK?

Usually the printer is not the publisher, but someone who takes an order from the publisher to print the book. Of course the printer can help the publisher with the ISBN application forms but it is required that the ISBN registrant element and the ISBN are registered in the name of the genuine publisher, to ensure the traceability of the publication in databases after it has been published.

I am an author/self-publisher and want to publish my (e-)book by means of a self-publishing platform. The platform has given the book an ISBN from its own ISBN registrant element. Is that OK?

In that case the platform will be considered the publisher. This is not recommended practice. If you later break the relationship with the platform and decide to distribute your book elsewhere, you will need a new ISBN of your own. It is therefore better to obtain an ISBN of your own from the start. ISBN agencies can assign ISBNs from ranges reserved for small publishers or even assign single ISBNs.

What does a publisher have to do to obtain ISBNs?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 14.4](#)

What will my designated ISBN registration agency ask me when I contact them to obtain an ISBN or ISBN registrant element?

You have to prove that you are based in the country for which the ISBN registration agency is responsible. The agency will ask you about your publishing plans for the next few years, and ask you to submit the metadata of your first book.

What requirements do publishers have to meet in order to participate in the ISBN system?

Publishers should comply with the implementation guidelines including the scope and assignment rules for ISBN. Publishers must supply the ISBN registration agency (or its designated local bibliographic agency) with the minimum set of metadata elements belonging to the ISBN as described in the ISBN standard and manual. Your national ISBN agency can inform you about the procedures to supply the metadata and the elements that are required.

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 8](#)

Details of the national agencies are available at: www.isbn-international.org/agencies

What happens if I have used all the numbers in my ISBN registrant element?

An additional registrant element can be assigned – allowing for a larger output if necessary. This is an additional registrant element and not a replacement.

I use ISBNs for internal purposes/publications that I do not wish to make available to the public. Do I still have to report them and submit metadata to the ISBN registration agency?

Yes. Your national ISBN agency has to keep a complete ISBN register in order to carry out the proper administration of the ISBN system in compliance with the guidelines of the ISBN standard.

If you do not submit the metadata of these ISBNs you might end up in the situation of having used up the complete capacity of your ISBNs, yet the ISBN Agency refuses to give you an additional registrant element because in the Agency's records they are not used up at all.

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 14.4](#)

What if I only want one ISBN?

In many countries ISBNs are available as single numbers (e.g. for author-publishers). There are some exceptions though where the ISBNs can only be obtained in registrant elements. Please refer to the ISBN agency which is responsible in your area.

Fees/costs for obtaining an ISBN

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 14.3](#)

Do I have to pay for an ISBN registrant element and for an ISBN?

Some agencies charge a fee to issue ISBNs and ISBN registrant elements.

Does the International ISBN Agency determine the cost of ISBNs? Is the cost of ISBNs the same everywhere?

The International ISBN Agency does not stipulate the fees for ISBNs since it is not directly responsible for their allocation at local level. Hence this task falls to the ISBN registration agencies and due to varying economic factors the costs of ISBNs is very likely to be different for each agency. The price for ISBN should, however, be fairly calculated in accordance with living costs in the agency's area of operation.

Display of ISBN including Barcoding

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 13](#)

Where should I display an ISBN?

On a printed book an ISBN should be included on the copyright page (also called the title verso page) or at the foot of the title page if there is no room on the copyright page. If there is no bar code, then the ISBN should also be on the back cover or jacket preferably at the lower right. In the case of electronic publications (such as compact discs, online publications), the ISBN must appear on the title display, that is the first display page or on the screen that displays the title or its equivalent (e.g., the

initial screen displayed when the content is first accessed and/or on the screen that carries the copyright notice). For eligible educational/instructional films, videos, and transparencies, the ISBN must appear on the credit titles.

If the publication is issued in a container that is an integral part of the publication (e.g., a compact disc, cassette, or diskette), the ISBN should be displayed on any labels included with that container. If it is not possible to display the ISBN on the container or its label, then the ISBN should be displayed at the bottom of the back of any permanent packaging for that container (e.g., the box, sleeve, or frame).

Can the ISBN be represented as a bar code?

Yes. The ISBN is already in 13-digit format and can be represented easily as a bar code. Bar coded ISBNs may assist distributors and retailers in stocking and selling your publication. Your ISBN agency should be able to provide advice on bar code suppliers to help you show your ISBN as a bar code graphic. To maximise the benefits of bar code recognition and scanning speed it is recommended to print the bar code on the lower right of the outside back cover of the publication.

GS1 (the global organisation responsible for product identification systems such as bar coding which is used to improve the efficiency of the supply chain) asked me to become a member. Is this mandatory?

No. If you only want to use the ISBN in bar-coded form, you do not have to become a member. However, as GS1 provides other trade-related services, such as electronic address numbers (location codes), EDI (electronic data interchange) formats, etc. you may want to become a member. Check with GS1 for information on their services and for details of current member organisations (www.gs1.org/contact/worldwide.php).

E-publications (digital publications)

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 9](#)

Do digital books qualify for ISBN?

In fact, it is of no relevance in what medium a publication is made available. Provided it is text-based, available to the public and a monographic publication not intended to be a continuing resource (serial publication), then it is likely to qualify for ISBN assignment. Downloadable e-books, e-book apps, CD-ROMS or on line publications available on the Internet can be considered to be monographic publications.

Do enhanced e-books qualify for ISBN?

When an e-book is available in enhanced form and, as well as text, includes audio, video or other additional content, it will qualify for ISBN. If the e-book is also available separately without these extra elements then these are different products and should therefore have separate ISBNs.

Do I have to identify different formats for digital publications with separate ISBNs?

Yes, whenever anyone in the supply chain needs to identify them separately, then each product

needs a unique ISBN. When there are different formats available that operate on different devices or software programs, the end user has to know what format to order. Therefore each different format has to be identified by its own ISBN.

I sell the same e-book in EPUB format but it is available with different usage constraints – in one edition you can copy and print and in the other edition you cannot. Do I need two ISBNs?

Yes, because these are features that have an effect on what the user can do with the publication (text-to speech, copying, printing, use on more than one device etc.) and the end user has to choose between the versions based on what he or she wants to do with it.

I sell an EPUB and the buyer can choose from a very wide variety of features and combinations of features when he buys the book. Do I have to give an ISBN to the product that is purchased?

No, because in this case we are talking about a customized product where the usage constraints are defined by the user during the purchase. The customized product does not qualify for ISBN at all because it is potentially unique.

I offer an EPUB for different rental periods and the buyer can choose from different rental periods at different prices. Do I HAVE to give an ISBN for each set of renting periods?

You CAN choose to do so, if it accommodates the requirements for identifying the specific combination of EPUB, rental period and price in the supply chain.

Do I have to identify “master files” with a separate ISBN?

When publishers provide a master file to a conversion service, this master file does not need its own ISBN. The publisher will need to assign ISBNs to the different versions that the provider creates, and that will be available to end customers.

I am selling identical e-books through different e-book platforms like Amazon and Apple. Each platform puts the files into its proprietary format. Do I have to give them separate ISBNs?

That is not necessary if the e-book platform supplies the e-books in a format that can only be bought through their own website, and the e-book platform itself does not require ISBNs. However, the publisher can choose to give ISBNs for its own purposes such as for tracking sales. In that case each ISBN should be unique to the version that is distributed by each separate platform.

I offer an e-book conversion service for publishers. What happens if they want us to convert to different versions and the publisher did not assign separate ISBN for each version?

Publishers should provide their conversion service with all the ISBNs that they will need to identify each of the versions that they will produce. If a publisher will not provide ISBNs to intermediaries for this purpose then, as a last resort, intermediaries may assign their own ISBNs. ISBN agencies will provide ISBN registrant elements to intermediaries for this purpose. In this case, ISBNs and related metadata should be provided back to the publisher and to the ISBN agency and other bibliographic agencies.

I am migrating the e-books that I publish to a new version of their file format (EPUB2 to EPUB3). Do I need to give them new ISBNs?

You do not need to give them new ISBNs when the books are no longer available in the old file format, and there is no difference in the user experience between the old version and the new version. In case both versions are on the market simultaneously, and/or the new version has different features, you will need separate ISBNs to identify both versions properly for the end user and the supply chain.

I am migrating the e-books that I publish to another type of DRM. Do I need to give them new ISBNs?

When you migrate to a type of DRM that changes the user's experience of the e-book you will need a new ISBN. E.g. when you migrate from no DRM to digital watermarking or another type of "social" DRM which does not intrude significantly on the user's experience, you do not need to assign separate ISBNs. When you migrate from no DRM to Adobe DRM, it means that the device on which you can read the e-book has to support Adobe DRM, and implies that you cannot read the book on just any device. In this case, you will need to assign separate ISBNs.

Print on demand, webpages, series

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 10](#)

Does a print-on-demand publication get an ISBN?

Yes. Print on demand is just a method of very short run printing.

Does a customised print-on-demand publication get an ISBN?

Generally, no. Publications that are available only on a limited basis, such as customised print-on-demand publications with content specifically tailored to a user's request shall not be assigned an ISBN. If a customised publication is being made available for wider sale, e.g. as a college course pack available through a college book store, then an ISBN should be assigned.

I have a homepage on the internet. Does it require an ISBN?

No. Publications that are intended by the publisher to be regularly updated or continued indefinitely (such as journals, magazines, newspapers, updating loose-leaves, updating websites) shall not receive an ISBN.

How are ISBNs allocated to multi-format/multi-volume works?

An ISBN must be allocated to the whole set of volumes of a multi-volume work; also, if the individual volumes of the set are sold separately, each volume must have its own ISBN. Even when each volume is not sold separately, the allocation of an ISBN to each volume is advisable. It facilitates the handling of returns (damaged volumes) and eliminates the possibility of confusion over specific volumes. Each volume should list all the ISBNs.

When a publisher assembles a set of books to sell as a special offer, may they assign an ISBN to the set?

If the ISBN is required to identify the set in the supply chain for marketing and ordering purposes then an ISBN may be assigned

When a distributor assembles books from different publishers in a set, may they assign an ISBN from their own range to the set?

As above, if the ISBN is required to identify the set in the supply chain for marketing and ordering purposes then an ISBN may be assigned, although use of a GTIN should be considered.

I am publishing a course pack. How do I use ISBN?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 11](#)

If the course pack will be available to the public (i.e. it is not restricted to the students on a particular course at a particular institution) you should assign an ISBN to the course pack as a whole. If any part is available separately, a separate ISBN must be allocated to each such part as well.

I am publishing a series of titles. Do I need an ISBN or an ISSN?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 4](#)

The series may receive an ISSN (provided it is envisaged as continuing indefinitely), while the individual items, if made available separately, may receive ISBNs.

I publish books but also calendars, stationery, toys and many other items. As the ISBN only identifies books, what can I do about the rest?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 4](#)

This material can be numbered by other numbering systems, such as GTIN (Global Trade Item numbers which can be represented as bar codes). Modern scanning equipment reads and processes the different kinds of bar-coded numbers.

When do I need a new ISBN?

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 6](#)

Is it possible to reassign ISBNs when the books to which they were allocated are out of print?

No, an ISBN identifies a given title and its edition and binding for all time. Even if out of print, it will still exist in some shops, and will certainly still exist in libraries.

Can I reassign ISBNs when the books to which they were allocated were never published at all?

No.

Does a price change require a new ISBN?

No.

Does a change of format require a new ISBN?

Yes, different formats need different ISBNs in order, for example, that a customer who wants to buy a book in hardback rather than paperback can be confident that they will receive the correct format.

Does a change of author's name require a new ISBN?

Yes - for example when an author decides to use their own name rather than a pseudonym.

I am revising a book. Does it require a new ISBN?

A (substantial) change of text requires a new ISBN, and if revisions have been made then the reverse of the title page should state that the book is a revised edition, and the new ISBN should be printed there.

Does a reprint without change of text or binding require a new ISBN?

No, the original number must be retained, provided the publisher remains the same.

I would like to issue a new ISBN for marketing reasons. Is this permissible?

No, if there is no change of text, format or binding which would justify a new ISBN. However, a separate ISBN may be assigned if required by the supply chain (e.g., when a media tie-in version of the jacket is available at the same time as the original version or when there is a choice of colour for the binding, as may be the case with bibles).

I am reprinting a book with a price change. Is a new ISBN required?

No, a price change does not require a new ISBN.

Do I need a new ISBN when I am reprinting a book with a new title?

Yes, a new title requires a new ISBN.

Co-publication, merging of publishers

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 7](#)

I am publishing a book with another publisher. Whose ISBN should appear on the book?

In the case of a joint publication, both publishers are entitled to have an ISBN on the book. It should be made clear which number identifies which publisher. However, if only one publisher is to hold stock and distribute the publication, then it is recommended that the ISBN of the publisher who is responsible for distribution appears in bar-coded form on the back cover of the book.

I am taking over another firm which already has an ISBN registrant element. All future books will be published under my name. Can I renumber all the other firm's titles?

Not until they are reprinted under your own publisher name or imprint and carry your publisher name.

My company has changed its name. Do I need a new registrant element of ISBNs?

No, that is not necessary but you should inform your ISBN agency about the change. In the individual ISBN metadata records, the imprint under which each book is published is listed. The books that were published under the old name will have the old name as imprint; the books that will be published under the new name will have the new name as imprint.

I am taking over one title or a set of titles from another publisher, while he carries on publishing other titles under his own name and numbering them from his existing ISBN registrant element. Do I have to renumber the titles I took over with ISBNs from my own registrant element?

No. The existing stock keeps the existing ISBN that is printed on the book. Only when you are going to republish the books under your publisher name should they be given new ISBNs from your registrant element.

Searching for books

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 8](#)

Will people in other countries be able to search for my books in search engines in those countries? If not, how can I make this possible?

This does not happen automatically, but by obtaining an ISBN you will be able to take the necessary steps to ensure that your book is widely known. In order for your book to be listed in other countries you should contact the respective ISBN Agency and ask them for details of how to be entered into their national catalogue for books in circulation (books in print). Sometimes you will have to obtain a distributor from that country or have an address in that country before this is possible. In some circumstances in order to be listed, the book must be in the language of that country. As well as catalogues of books in circulation, you may also want to ensure that you are listed by internet retailers such as Amazon. Again, you will need to contact each of these organisations directly (including each separate international branch) with details of your book. You can contact Amazon UK, for instance, through the publisher section of their site:

www.amazon.co.uk/gp/help/customer/display.html?ie=UTF8&nodeId=3935

Searching for publishers

⇒ [See ISBN Users' Manual Chapter 19](#)

I have the ISBN of a book and I want to contact the publisher. How can I retrieve information about the publisher from the ISBN?

You can search in the Global Register of Publishers at www.grp.isbn-international.org

My company's postal address, telephone number, email address or website address has changed. Do I have to notify my ISBN Agency?

Yes. Keeping your agency informed of your current contact details will help to ensure that people can order your books easily and that you continue to make sales!

I am moving my company to another country. Can I continue numbering my books with my current ISBN registrant element?

When you move outside the working area of your ISBN agency, and into the working area of another ISBN agency, your new publications have to be numbered using a new ISBN registrant element from the agency that operates where you are now based.

I have stopped publishing, do not sell my books anymore and will not use my ISBNs any longer. Do I have to notify my designated ISBN Agency?

Yes. The agency will update their records. Your registrant element will remain associated with your publisher name; none of the ISBNs will be given to anyone else.