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Introduction to BIC Basic Metadata

The book industry uses the term *metadata* to mean all the information related to your product – not just the title and author name, price and publication date, but also a range of other data that helps you work effectively with your supply chain partners to promote and sell your book. This BIC Bite examines the essential data fields needed to describe each book, how that data is communicated, and touches on the business benefits of ensuring the *quality* of that metadata.

Background

Until the 1990s, most book metadata was on paper, in catalogues, stocklists, advance information sheets and so on. But increasing e-commerce, and in particular the growth of online bookselling, raised the importance of metadata and the need to make it widely available in digital form. Nowadays, metadata is critical, as the majority of book discovery and purchase takes place online, and of course online is the only place to find eBooks. Publishers and retailers use metadata to market books to people making their purchasing decisions on PCs, laptops, tablets and phones – even if many of the books themselves are still on paper.

Developing metadata standards

The book publishing industry has long recognised the need for standards in metadata. This is exemplified by the ISBN, an identifier originating in the UK book trade in the late 1960s. Today, the ISBN is recognised globally as *the* product identifier of record, and is used by all participants in the trade. Most retailers and libraries will not stock a book without an ISBN. And in the 1990s, organisations including Book Industry Communication (BIC) in the UK, Book Industry Study Group (BISG) in North America, and [EDiTEUR](#), an international group coordinating standards including ONIX and *Thema*, recognised the need for standards and best practices for communicating metadata.

BIC's *BIC Basic* standard provides a *minimum* benchmark for a publisher communicating product metadata to intermediaries and booksellers of all kinds, be they independent bookshops, chain retailers, wholesalers, data aggregators or online stores. Good metadata practices increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the supply chain, and research (book2look.com/book/jgryEFV2dq) has shown that meeting and exceeding this minimum standard makes a publisher's print, eBook and audiobook products more discoverable and increases their sales.

List of data elements for BIC Basic metadata

BIC Basic metadata falls into two groups: the first eleven data elements are **mandatory** and the second group are **required if certain dependencies are met**.

Mandatory	Required if dependencies met
ISBN or GTIN-13	Author name(s) (<i>unless there is no author</i>)
Title	Subtitle (<i>if there is a subtitle on the book</i>)
Whole product form (hardback, paperback etc)	Series title (<i>if part of a series or set</i>)
Main BIC Subject category	Edition number (<i>if 2nd edition, 3rd edition etc.</i>)
Imprint (brand) name and/or Publisher name	Product properties (<i>extent, physical size etc.</i>)
Date of publication or of availability in UK	Non-trade supplier name (<i>if not distributed to trade</i>)
Jacket/cover image (as a high-quality JPEG)	Availability date (<i>if not available immediately</i>)
At least one distributor/wholesaler name or GLN	VAT detail (<i>% tax rate, ex-VAT amount etc.</i>)
Availability status (awaited, in stock, out of stock etc.)	Price effective from date (<i>if changing price</i>)
GBP retail price including VAT	Price effective until date (<i>if changing price</i>)
Sales rights relating to the UK (for sale or not for sale)	

The mandatory data listed above is the *absolute minimum* needed to describe a book product to your trade partners. The data listed under ‘required if dependencies met’ will also frequently be required.

There are many important elements that you will *not* find on either list, such as ‘short description’, ‘author biography’ or prices and sales rights for other countries, and these are sometimes referred to as *enhanced metadata*. This richer data can be immensely valuable to improved discoverability and higher sales – but BIC Basic is a *minimum* set of requirements. A publisher should always check with their trading partners for particular extra requirements they may have for their own systems and processes, above and beyond BIC Basic.

BIC Basic forms the basis of BIC’s current Product Data Excellence Award scheme (bic.org.uk/90/Product-Data). Revision of this scheme means the Basic set will be extended to cover a wider set of requirements from 2020. Among others, the following data elements will become mandatory for even the *lowest* level of accreditation:

Mandatory	Required if dependencies met
ONIX terminology and codes (even in Excel/CSV files)	Contributor roles (unless there are no contributors)
<i>Thema</i> subject category	Language of text (if not English)
Target readership (audience)	Lower and upper ages (if children’s or educational)
Publisher <i>and</i> Imprint	Edition types (e.g. Abridged/unabridged for audio)
	ISBN of related products (e.g. predecessor, alt format)

How to communicate to the book trade

There are a number of methods for communicating your metadata to your trade partners and the broader book industry: web portals, CSV files and spreadsheets, and ONIX are the primary options. Note that a publisher should always confer with their trade partners to ascertain their preferred method for receiving metadata.

Web portals are online sites for recording an individual title’s information, one metadata field at a time. The portal will guide a publisher towards creating an acceptable metadata record. Such portals are available from both Nielsen Book Data, home of the UK ISBN Agency, and Bowker, home to the US ISBN Agency. But portals require manual re-keying of data, are error-prone, and are very inefficient for more than a handful of products.

Excel spreadsheets can be used in a variety of ways to send title information. You may be able to send an Excel or CSV file based on your own template, but it’s more likely your trade partners will have templates of their own, with a pre-set layout and instructions for organising the product records. This ensures the metadata they wish to prioritise is delivered and processed correctly in their system – but as a result, every template is different, and it again becomes labour-intensive sending the same data many times on slightly different templates. Spreadsheets also become prone to errors when more than a couple of dozen products and data columns are involved.

ONIX (editeur.org/83/Overview) is a standard XML-based format used for communicating metadata in bulk. ONIX allows for the richest and most flexible metadata delivery in the book trade; there is a separate BIC Bite describing ONIX on BIC’s website. Note that even if you don’t use ONIX yourself, it’s still important as your metadata is likely to be exchanged between your trading partners and other parts of the publishing supply chain in ONIX format.

Further information

You can find detailed information about BIC Basic at www.bic.org.uk/17/bic-basic. BIC members can discuss metadata issues with the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee, and BIC also runs a range of metadata training.