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Introduction to the International Standard Book Number (ISBN)¹

The ISBN manages to be both familiar (those numbers on the backs of books!), and strangely esoteric (what do the numbers mean?) at the same time. This BIC Bite will explain how the ISBN contributes to a healthy supply chain and provide some basic best practice guidance.

Introduction

The idea to have a specific identifier for books emerged in the 1960s, prompted in part by WH Smith's plans to develop the first computerised warehouse for books, and so Standard Book Numbering started in 1967 in the UK. Interest from US, Canada, Australia, Denmark, The Netherlands and Sweden quickly followed, and by 1972 the ISBN was an International Standard.

Today, there are 150 national and regional ISBN Agencies providing ISBN services to publishers. Nielsen operate the UK and Ireland ISBN Agency (all publishers based there should apply to them for ISBNs), and the International ISBN Agency is responsible for coordinating the system worldwide.

What is the ISBN?

The ISBN identifies a specific book by a specific publisher in a specific format and/or edition and can accompany a publication right from its commission and throughout all stages of its editing, production, marketing, sales, rights and royalty transactions.

Since 1 January 2007, all ISBNs are 13 digits and consist of the following 5 elements:

- GS1 element (3 digits: either 978 or 979)
- Registration group element identifying the national, regional, language or other such grouping (1 to 5 digits in length)
- Registrant/publisher element denoting the publisher (1 to 7 digits in length)
- Publication element denoting the specific product (1 to 6 digits in length)
- Check digit to validate the whole number (1 digit)

The ISBN is just 13 digits, but for ease of reading it's often displayed with spaces or hyphens between the 5 elements.

When and how should you use the ISBN?

The ISBN identifies uniquely any publication (print or digital) that is within the scope of the Standard – whether a hardback, an audiobook on CD or a downloadable file, for example. The Standard's scope is broad. Publications that are text-based, and are available to the public can all use ISBNs if they are not intended to come out regularly as serials, newsletters, etc. There is no minimum extent, so a chapter or section of a longer work can be identified by ISBN if it is released as a stand-alone product. With an ISBN a publisher can maximise the availability of a book without being restricted to certain channels or outlets.

In most cases, the publisher assigns the ISBN to a publication from a block of ISBNs unique to the publisher. The block size will vary according to the projected output of the publisher². The ISBN indicates the location and the name of the publisher or imprint, but beyond that each ISBN has no inherent meaning. To ensure the accuracy of bibliographic metadata and sales reporting, publishers with multi-national and/or multi-imprint operations should only use ISBNs that have been assigned to the office and imprint that is producing the book. ISBNs should be assigned based on the next one available and without trying to build in any significance, such as assigning ISBNs from a specific section of the block to all the history books in the publisher's list.

¹ The ISBN Standard is published as ISO 2108 by International Organization for Standardization.

² Depending on their expected number of publications, a publisher may receive 10, 100 or 1,000 ISBNs, or, more rarely, allocations of 10k, 100k and even up to a million for the very largest publishers.

Just a number?

The ISBN itself is merely 13 digits, yet it is the glue to hold lots of other pieces of information about the book. Book trade message formats (such as ONIX for Books, which is perhaps the most widely used) link rich product metadata elements to the ISBN to provide a comprehensive description of the publication (not just the title, author and publisher, but details such as awards, author biography, reviews and jacket images too). The ISBN and the associated metadata form the building blocks for inclusion in “books in print” databases, for creating web pages and facilitating searches, for ordering and sales tracking. Recent analysis suggests that titles with complete, appropriate and descriptive metadata sell more copies³ and, of course, the ISBN provides the key foundation for that.

Following an agreement made between EAN International, Uniform Code Council and the International ISBN Agency, ISBNs can be easily represented in bar code form which improves the speed and accuracy of sales processing and stock replenishment of printed books. Now that ISBNs are always 13 digits, the ISBN and its bar code equivalent are numerically identical. In addition, although items outside scope can't be assigned ISBNs, non-book products intended for sale in bookshops should instead be allocated GTIN-13s to ensure compatibility with retailer systems.

Helping the supply chain

The ISBN Standard has been periodically reviewed by experts from various stakeholder groups (publishers, distributors, booksellers, bibliographic aggregators, librarians, etc.) who have worked to develop guidelines about the implementation of ISBN so that the system functions reliably, consistently and optimally for all parts of the supply chain. Following and applying these “rules” enables supply chain partners to interpret and process information about books in the most efficient way and minimises uncertainty.

Here are some of the key norms:

- Changes in **any** of the following aspects of a publication mean a new ISBN is required:
 - Language
 - Edition
 - Product form or product form detail or product form feature or physical size (e.g. if a book is available in Braille, EPUB, web .pdf, jacketed hardback, black cover, white cover, A-format paperback, B-format paperback, each will need a unique ISBN)
 - Imprint or publisher
 - Usage constraints on a digital product (e.g. whether you can lend to a friend, etc.)
- Once assigned, an ISBN should never be reused on any other publication
- Publishers with multiple locations and/or multiple imprints should always assign from the ISBN block allocated to that location and those imprints – this avoids listing problems and helps the bookseller
- A change in only the price of a book does not require a new ISBN
- If a publication is part of a set, the whole set is assigned an ISBN as well as each volume.

Further information

The International ISBN Agency website (www.isbn-international.org) provides lots more information about the ISBN, including a list of ISBN Agencies. A Users' Manual and FAQs is available at: <https://www.isbn-international.org/content/isbn-users-manual>. You can also search for information about publishers using the Global Register: <https://grp.isbn-international.org/>. The UK ISBN Agency is Nielsen Book (www.nielsenisbnstore.com); for ISBN Agencies in other countries / regions, please check the International ISBN Agency's website (provided above).

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³ https://www.nielsenisbnstore.com/uploads/10451_Nielsen_Book_UK_Study_The_Importance_of_Metadata_for_Discoverability_and_Sales_Digital_D6.pdf