

Publishing FAQs

Where does an ISBN get placed on a book?

An ISBN gets placed on the copyright page and, if there is no bar code, on the back cover.

What is the difference between a bar code and an ISBN?

An ISBN is a number. A bar code is the graphic with vertical lines that encodes numerical information for scanning purposes. An ISBN and a bar code are two different things.

If a publisher is selling their books on their own and are not trying to place them in stores or libraries or with wholesalers, is an ISBN required?

No, an ISBN is not required.

Do ISBNs have to be assigned to books that are not being sold?

No, they do not have to be assigned, but they can be.

Are different ISBNs used if a book appears in different languages?

Yes. Each language version is a different product.

If the price of the book changes, does the ISBN?

No. The ISBN only changes if the product changes.

If changing the cover of a book, does a new ISBN have to be assigned?

US practice is if the book is just out or the idea is to give a marketing boost to the product, then no, a new ISBN should not be assigned. However, if the change in cover substantially changes the product (ie., would lead to customer complaints), then a new ISBN should be used.

If typos are being corrected, is a new ISBN necessary?

No.

Can an ISBN be reused?

No, once a title is published with an ISBN on it, the ISBN can never be used again. Even if a title goes out of print, the ISBN cannot be reused since the title continues to be catalogued by libraries and traded by used booksellers.

What's the difference between a reprint and a new edition?

A reprint means more copies are being printed with no substantial changes. Perhaps a few typos are being fixed. A new edition means that there has been substantial change: content has been altered in a way that might make a customer complain that this was not the product that was expected. Or, text has been changed to add a new feature, such as a preface or appendix or additional content. Or, content has been revised.

If a second edition has the same title as the first, does it keep the same ISBN?

No. A new edition is considered a different product and gets its own ISBNs.

How are ISBNs assigned to multi-volume works?

ISBNs are assigned to the volumes as they are sold as products. If they are only available as a set, the set gets one ISBN. If each volume is available separately and as a set, each volume gets an ISBN and the set gets an ISBN.

How are ISBNs assigned to books in a series?

An ISBN is assigned to each book in the series. A series of books is also eligible for an ISSN (International Standard Series Number), available from the Library of Congress.

Can ISBNs be assigned to loose-leaf volumes?

Yes, such reference works are routinely tracked by revenue strands (individual vs. library subscription reporting) by publishers.

How are ISBNs assigned to packages?

ISBNs are assigned to the package and to the individual products in the package if (a) the product is eligible for an ISBN and (b) the products are sold separately. Any product that needs to be ordered as a distinct product and that is eligible for an ISBN, should be assigned an ISBN in addition to the package itself, if it contains items that are eligible for an ISBN.

If an ISBN is assigned in another country, does a US ISBN have to be gotten to sell the book in the US?

No. All ISBNs are international. There is no such thing as a US ISBN. ISBNs are international, but assigned locally.

If one company buys another, can the buyer use the ISBNs or do they have to get new ISBNs?

The company being bought can have all its ISBNs transferred to the new owner. If the company is a subdivision or subsidiary of the new company, it can maintain its

own unique ISBN prefix. If the company being bought is being demoted to an imprint (a brand) with no legal standing of its own, then the new parent company can use the ISBNs at will for any title it publishes.

I got my ISBN from my printer and now I want to make sure it's in my name, how do I transfer the ISBN?

ISBNs cannot be transferred on an individual basis. If a self-publisher wants to be identified as the publisher, the self-publisher must get their own ISBN. A printing company or publisher services company cannot sell, give away or transfer one of their ISBNs to a customer.

If more than one publisher or self-publisher is publishing a book, whose ISBN goes on the book?

The publisher handling order fulfillment places their ISBN on the book. However, both publishers are entitled to put their ISBNs on the book in the case of a jointly published publication.

Can I use one of my friend's (or relative's) ISBNs?

No.

If a spouse or family member passes away, can a relative or surviving spouse use the remaining ISBNs?

The ISBNs are considered property of the publishing company and all of the ISBNs can be transferred to the new owners, including a family member. The entire block of ISBNs is transferred to the new company owner(s). The block of ISBNs cannot be divided up among family members.

If an author gets the publishing rights back, does the original publisher's ISBN remain?

No. The author cannot use the original publisher's ISBN. The ISBN identifies the one who holds the publishing rights—that is, the publisher who should be contacted when ordering the book. If the author is going to be publishing the book, the author must get their own ISBN.

Can a US fulfillment house assign an ISBN to a book with an ISBN assigned by another ISBN Agency in another country?

No. All ISBNs are international. The only times a distributor or fulfillment house can assign an ISBN are a) if the product is sold by a publisher in a country that has no ISBN Agency or b) for internal tracking use only.

If I'm using a print-on-demand company (POD), whose ISBN goes on my book?

Whoever is to be identified as the publisher obtains the ISBN. In most cases, the POD is the publisher and puts their ISBN on the book. In very rare cases, due to the contractual arrangements between the POD and the self-publisher, the self-publisher is the publisher. Most of the time, the POD is the publisher because the POD fulfills orders.

Are custom publications assigned ISBNs?

No, custom publications are not assigned ISBNs unless such assignment is necessary for a publisher's back office systems, such as finance, since there is only one customer in such arrangements.

Can ISBNs be assigned to magazines?

ISBNs are not assigned to magazines, academic journals or other periodicals. However, if a single issue of a periodical is being sold as a book, then that issue alone may be assigned an ISBN.

What products are eligible or not eligible for ISBNs?

The ISBN is intended for a monographic publication: text that stands on its own as a product, whether printed, audio or electronic. ISBNs are never assigned to music, performances or images, such as art prints or photographs.

- Advertising and promotional materials are not eligible for ISBNs.
- Audiobooks are eligible for ISBNs.
- Board games do not get ISBNs.
- Broadside are eligible for ISBNs if the content is not serial in nature. A broadside, also called a broadsheet, is a large sheet of paper, newspaper-size, which is printed, almost poster-like, on one side.
- Calendars are not assigned ISBNs unless required by the retailer.
- CDs are only eligible for ISBNs if they are spoken word or instructional. Music CDs are never assigned ISBNs. Meditation CDs that combine music and spoken word are not eligible for ISBNs. Music CDs are assigned UPC bar codes.
- Clothing is never assigned an ISBN.
- Chapters, paragraphs, charts and other sections of published text are eligible for their own ISBNs if a publisher is selling them separately.
- Coffee mugs and other utensils are not assigned ISBNs.
- Coloring books are eligible for ISBNs.
- Comic books, since they are serials, do not get ISBNs. However, graphic novels are eligible for ISBNs.
- DVDs may not get an ISBN if they are entertainment or performance videos. If the DVD is instructional or educational, then the DVD is eligible for an ISBN. However, retailers vary in their requirements regarding the type of product identification. Publishers should check with their retailers for requirements.

- Electronic games are not eligible for ISBNs.
- Flash cards, if instructional, are eligible for ISBNs. Playing cards and tarot cards are not eligible for ISBNs.
- Food and medicine are never assigned ISBNs.
- Greeting cards are not assigned ISBNs unless required by the retailer. If assigned, they are assigned by price point rather than design. For example, if several different designs are all sold for the same price, only one ISBN is used.
- Journals and diaries can be assigned ISBNs when required by retailers.
- Magazines, periodicals and serials of any type do not get ISBNs. They are assigned ISSNs, available from the Library of Congress, or BIPAD numbers, available at bipad.com.
- Maps are eligible for ISBNs.
- Music or performance CDs do not get assigned ISBNs. Spoken word or instructional CDs are eligible for ISBNs. If the CD or DVD is eligible for an ISBN, the ISBN is placed near the copyright line on the packaging. The UPC (now called the GS1) bar code is the appropriate product identification standard for a music CD.
- Pamphlets and brochures are eligible for ISBNs.
- Pictures are not eligible for ISBNs. ISBNs are never assigned to images; they are used for text.
- Playing cards and tarot cards and flash cards are not eligible for ISBNs. Flash cards, if instructional in nature, are eligible for ISBNs.
- Postcards are not assigned ISBNs.
- Posters, art prints, and photographs are not assigned ISBNs.
- Puzzle books are eligible for ISBNs, including but not limited to crossword puzzles and Sudoku books.
- Sheet music does not get ISBNs. The ISMN is the appropriate standard for sheet music, which doesn't have any binding. ISBNs are assigned to books of printed music.
- Shirts and other apparel are not assigned ISBNs.
- Software does not get ISBNs unless it is educational or instructional only.
- Stationery items are not assigned ISBNs.
- Toys, including stuffed animals, are not eligible for ISBNs.

Can I get an e-ISBN?

There is no such thing as an e-ISBN and such terminology should not be used. There are only ISBNs, and ISBNs must conform to the rules of the international standard. The term 'eISBN' is problematic because publishers have been using it in two different ways. First, to mean 'the ISBN for a particular eBook format', MobiPocket for example, when the publisher is allocating ISBNs to each individual format (analogous to hardback and paperback), as recommended within the standard. And second to mean 'the single ISBN being used for all the publishers' eBook formats'. This latter usage breaks the rules of the ISBN standard, which explicitly requires a separate ISBN for each digital file format.

Do I use the same ISBN on the print book and on the e-book since the content is the same?

No. The print product and the e-book are two different products and should be tracked separately since the ISBN acts like an ordering number or a serial number.

If I am selling my e-book through only one online distributor, do I need an ISBN?

Yes, any time that a product is sold in the supply chain, it needs to be tracked for trading, discovery, and reporting purposes.

Who assigns the ISBN on an e-book: distributor, the manufacturer/vendor, or the publisher?

It is the publisher who is responsible for assigning an ISBN to each format of an e-book. Just as with print products, distributors and manufacturer/vendors are not entitled to assign ISBNs. Publishers should be contacted regarding the need to assign an ISBN and educated about assignment protocols. If distributors assign ISBNs, duplicate assignments and confusion in the supply chain can result.

Can ISBNs be assigned according to access rights?

Yes, if a product needs to be tracked in the supply chain for trading, discovery, and reporting, it can be assigned a separate ISBN. Assessing distinctions between access rights programs for customers requires separate reporting.

Are bar codes required for e-books?

Since e-books are by definition electronic, there is nothing physical to scan. A bar code can only be placed on something physical, such as a print product that is scannable.

If my e-books are found only on the web, do they need ISBNs?

Yes. Like other publications, e-books need to be tracked in the publishing industry supply chain just as all publications do.

When do print books get DOIs?

A DOI is a URL, a live link. A print book is not digital and so cannot have a live link on it. It is possible to use a DOI to link ABOUT the print book—ie., advertising, promotional materials, etc., but the DOI itself does not identify the product for tracking and trading.

Do e-books get DOIs instead of ISBNs?

A DOI is not as much an identifier as it is a link that can connect information about an e-book or connect one to an e-book. It doesn't identify the product itself for ordering purposes as the ISBN does.

If a book is available on CD and web, can the web version get an ISBN?

Websites are not assigned ISBNs. However, if the publisher needs to identify tracking, trading and discovery between two product types, one of which is an accessible web-based product, then the ISBN can be assigned to the product in its web-based version.

Do cell phone novels get ISBNs?

Yes, the content of such a publication could be identified by ISBN in this format.

Can Podiobooks get ISBNs?

Yes, this format of audio book could be assigned an ISBN.

Does the content of an e-book get the ISBN or its formats?

ISBNs should be assigned to each format of an e-book in the same way that separate ISBNs would be assigned to hardcover, paperback and audiobooks.

Do USB sticks get ISBNs?

Devices themselves are not assigned ISBNs, but the text content sold in this particular format may be identified by an ISBN.

Do web-based games get ISBNs?

No. Electronic games, whether web-based or otherwise, are not eligible for ISBNs.

Are electronic schedulers assigned ISBNs?

No, electronic devices are not assigned ISBNs, but a program on the device could be assigned an ISBN, if it were instructional or educational in nature..

Can publications subject to frequent update (online databases, blogs) be assigned ISBNs?

No.

Can emails be assigned ISBNs?

No.

Can search engines be assigned ISBNs?

No.

Can personal documents, if digitized be assigned ISBNs?

No.

Can historical documents archived in a library or museum, if digitized, be assigned an ISBN?

Yes. Historical documents are part of the bibliographic record of interest to researchers. They meet the criteria for discoverability and reporting that is part of the ISBN system.

Can electronic advertising and promotional materials be assigned ISBNs?

No.

Can electronic newsletters and e-zines be assigned ISBNs?

No, like other periodicals, electronic periodicals are not eligible for ISBNs.

Can digital customized publications be assigned ISBNs?

No, unless a publisher's internal assignment is necessary for back office systems, such as finance or inventory control.

What's the point of allocating an ISBN to an eBook?

The reasons for allocating an ISBN to an eBook are the same as for a print book. ISBNs enable the product to be uniquely identified and traded within a supply chain. In addition, ISBNs are linked to unambiguous bibliographical records for search, discovery and cataloguing; and facilitate sales reporting at the individual product level between business partners, and for analysis, bestseller listings and royalty accounting.

I've heard that the International ISBN Agency, BIC and BISG recommend that every separate eBook format, and every library platform should have its own unique ISBN. Can't a publisher use one ISBN to cover all eBook formats?

No. The ISBN standard (ISO 2108) doesn't permit one ISBN to cover multiple formats. "Different product forms (e.g. hardcover, paperback, Braille, audio-book, video, online electronic publication) shall be assigned separate ISBNs. Each different format of an electronic publication (e.g. ".lit", ".pdf", ".html", ".pdb") that is published and made separately available shall be given a separate ISBN."

This is also a supply chain requirement. Retailers, distributors, aggregators, libraries, bibliographic agencies and others require each format of an ebook to be separately identified with ISBN for purposes of discovery, selection, acquisition,

cataloguing and sales data reporting. The BIC/BISG discussion document (<http://www.bic.org.uk/pdf/identification-digibook.pdf>) is more about what not to do than what to do.

Hasn't the .epub specification changed all this?

The new .epub standard for eBook source files is of major significance and will be critical in the development of the consumer eBook market. For publishers, .epub means that they can meet many of their eBook file requirements by providing a single file to their retail partners. This has, however, nothing to do with the supply chain, where a multiplicity of formats and platforms will persist, albeit using content derived from a single .epub source file. In one respect, .epub has simply moved the complexity (and conversion/file-rendering, however much simplified) downstream to the re-seller partners. While publishers no longer need to manage their own converted eBook files with unique identifiers, those re-sellers will still need to do so.

Won't the ISTC solve all this?

The ISTC is an identifier of 'textual works'. It won't identify physical or digital products, such as books and e-books, and it will play no role in the trading of products, whether physical or digital. ISTC is intended to facilitate the exchange of information among authors, agents, publishers, retailers, librarians. It will help people bring together different manifestations of the same title, to identify, for example, War and Peace as an original work – providing a mechanism for bringing together all printed and digital editions, as well as products in a whole range of other media.

What about proprietary eBooks like Sony's and Kindle?

Some publishers supply proprietary ready-formatted digital files to retailers and other commercial partners., Others supply their trading partners with standard source files (.epub, PDF etc) which are subsequently rendered into those proprietary formats. . As source files, rather than products in themselves, these 'production' files are not eligible for ISBN allocation.

Retailers (such as Amazon or Sony or their partners) should be discouraged from displaying ISBNs for these proprietary formats unless these are separate and unique ISBNs for the two individual format renderings. Publishers will need to allocate such separate ISBNs if they wish to promote or advertise these formats within their own catalogue websites, and if they wish to see them listed as format choices within the Bowker and NBD bibliographical services. And publishers may independently wish to publish content in formats which the Amazon and Sony devices can read, but without the proprietary encryption and DRM. Linking to these products through clickable text or icons (perhaps employing DOI for persistence) will only go part of the way to achieve these aims.

What if publishers don't assign separate ISBNs, but distributors and retailers need them?

Publishers should allocate unique, separate ISBNs to each available format and platform for the benefit of standard identification in the supply chain by retailers, distributors, libraries, bibliographic databases, sales reporting etc.

If the publisher has not provided an eBook ISBN by format, or has used a composite identifier which covers many formats, distributor and aggregators may wish to allocate their own ISBN, particularly if they want to promote their site (if their rights to sell are non-exclusive) or just to simplify their internal processes.

Will we see a shift to retailers (and library platforms) issuing their own ISBNs for eBooks?

This is already happening where resellers already have their own ISBN prefixes, and is bound to increase if these downstream re-selling businesses find benefit in having products with unique ISBNs and the publisher has either not allocated an ISBN at all, has only allocated one to a generic .epub format or has allocated a single ISBN shared across formats available simultaneously from competing re-sellers.

Publishers need to decide the nature of the eBook supply-chain relationship. Are publishers selling a product to a retailer to sell on, just like a print book, which is 'their', the publisher's, product all the way through to the user/consumer, and identifiable as such, with their ISBN and their prefix? Or are they allowing the retailer to create any number of products from a source file, which the publisher is simply licensing – leaving it to the retailer to own and brand the product with their own ISBN and prefix?

There is evidence that publishers will be nervous of this latter outcome, but they will be leaving retailers with no alternative if they have not pre-allocated separate identifiers themselves.

Aren't all PDF library eBooks just one format?

Online (and sometimes downloadable) PDF eBooks are available from a number of different library services (for example, netLibrary, ebrary, Ingram MyiLibrary, Dawson, Blackwell). It is likely that these vendors will require ISBNs for eBooks in order to sell into the library sector, without generating confusion either with the print copies which they may also be selling, or within the libraries' catalogues and MARC records. So the first point to make is that if publishers do not allocate ISBNs for these, then it is likely that these library services will allocate their own, with their own prefixes.

A consumer PDF, prepared with Adobe DRM in Adobe Reader or Adobe Digital Editions to a standard specification, is in all supply-chain respects the same as a print book. Many eBook retailers will be selling the identical Adobe eBook; the look-and-feel of the consumer reading experience is identical; and the user's DRM rights (print, copy, read-aloud – as set by the publisher) are the same. A consumer can buy

the same product wherever eBooks are sold – again with a direct analogy to the print book trade. The BIC-BISG discussion document on ebook identification argues that these products require a single unique identifier, ISBN, for all channels.

The analogy does not hold for library PDF eBooks. These are proprietary in many ways. For the moment, the majority of these eBooks are simply digital facsimiles of print originals, so the textual content is identical. But the features and functionality, look-and-feel, screen display of these platforms does vary; as do the usage rights and DRM. It is likely that over time, these platforms will diverge more (as have academic journals platforms) as they compete to enhance their services. These online library versions may be corrected, or updated dynamically, or supplemented with additional material. Publishers may –over time – prefer to revise and enhance only certain formats selectively, so that eBooks which started out identical do not remain so in the longer term.

For these more sophisticated eBooks, library users will, for discovery and collection management, want to know more than just that a library eBook is available. They will want to know which service it is available from, since they will definitely have preferences (for particular business pricing or access models; or for usage rights restrictions); and will have accounts with some library vendors and not with others. These library vendors will obviously also be marketing their services, and the titles they have licensed to them. They will require ISBNs for these.

What identifier should I put on the eBook digital products themselves (for example, on a copyright page)?

Whatever you put on/in the product itself, an identifier is only helpful to anyone if it uniquely identifies that product (and specifically, that eBook version). Best practice at present would be to follow the ISBN standard recommendations and show the individual ISBNs of the product in question, and, in addition, all manifestations of the identical textual content (the ‘work’) in eBook formats and in print.

The analogy is displaying both hardback and paperback ISBNs on the copyright page of each print format. What is not acceptable practice, and benefits no-one in the supply chain – whether publisher, retailer, librarian or consumer, is to display a generic number which is common to many products and unique to none.

Aren’t we moving, with eBooks, away from fixed products, to a customised world where people will pick and mix, recombining and chunking disparate bits of content? Are we going to need a different ISBN every time?

Whoever (publisher, retailer, aggregator) is assembling and selling compiled ‘virtual’ products will need to be able to track, identify, and price very small and granular elements within their internal management system. But a product assembled on the fly won’t be traded outside that narrow one-to-one relationship at that specific moment in time; it won’t be marketed or promoted as an entity in itself; it won’t be in catalogues and libraries; and it won’t be listed in bibliographic

databases.No purpose is served in it having a tradable, visible-to-all supply-chain identifier – an ISBN.

Isn't the content of different eBook formats all the same?

At the moment, in these early days for eBooks, mainly yes, while most eBooks are simply digital facsimile digital replicas of print originals. This may long continue to be the case for simple 'long-form narrative' content such as fiction or biography. Over time, however, it is likely that features, functionality and content will start to vary, depending on the capabilities of the format. eBooks designed for PCs will support richer and more sophisticated video and audio multi-media content; some formats will allow colour, others won't; some will support hyperlinking wirelessly out to the web, others won't. Some will have complex internal linking and cross-referencing. DRM rights – the rights to share, or print, or copy-and-paste, or to read-aloud, will vary from format to format and from platform to platform. Just as users will need to know whether this eBook or that will actually run on their chosen device, so, over time, will users want to make discriminatory decisions based on features and function. It is likely, in particular, that online versions will diverge from perpetually purchased offline downloaded versions, particularly those downloaded to devices. Those online versions may be corrected, or updated dynamically, or supplemented with additional material. And even online, with library eBooks, publishers may – again over time – prefer to revise and enhance only certain formats selectively, so that eBooks which started out identical do not remain so in the longer term. For these more sophisticated eBooks, users will need to be navigated through the choices available to them.

Won't all these ISBNs be impossible to manage and bloat our systems?

Computers are designed to manage complexity. The recommendations of BIC, BISG and the ISBN Agency are that ISBNs need only to be allocated if there is some reason and benefit in doing so and if the allocation conforms with international standards[?].

As publishers move towards selling fragmented content – chapters etc. – there will be an increasing need for more and more identifiers. This cannot be avoided. Best-practice recommends that ISBN is the most appropriate and serviceable standard for this. However, as with eBook ISBNs, there will only be the requirement to use ISBNs if there is benefit in doing so – and, not, for example, if fragmented content is only ever distributed from a sole source of supply.

In the same way, there is probably no supply-chain imperative for publishers or Amazon to allocate an ISBN to a Kindle reader eBook, while this device, and content for it, is exclusive and proprietary to Amazon. The need for a Kindle ISBN arises if the publisher wants consumers going to other sites (perhaps including their own) to know that this format is available; or if publishers start offering Kindle-readable content through other channels.

Shouldn't we be using Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs)?

No, not as a substitute for ISBNs. A DOI name is not intended as an alternative for an identifier from another scheme, such as ISBN. ISBN-based commercial, invoicing and accounting systems in the supply chain will usually not recognise DOI, since the two identifier schemes serve different purposes and are not interchangeable.

However a standard syntax exists for incorporating ISBNs into DOIs for cases where publishers want to add the functionality of DOI: for example, a DOI can be used to provide a publisher-controlled and moderated, fully dynamic, and updatable "destination" on the Internet where fuller information, can be provided, so it's a really good idea to use DOIs to help users discover eBooks and find out how to buy them. Information about this is available from DOI registration agencies.