

What is an ISBN and Why do I need it?



N.B. Human readable ISBN can be shown with hyphens or spaces

What is an ISBN?

- 13 Digit Code printed in the front of your book, eBook, or associated with an audio book.
- Contains the EAN and ISBN
 - EAN = European Article Number (1st 3 digits)
 - Barcode standard
 - Part of product identification code
 - Used to print the sales bar code on the book
 - ISBN = International Standard Book Number (10 digits)
 - What do the numbers mean?
 - **Prefix element** – currently this can only be either 978 or 979. It is always 3 digits in length
 - **Registration Group Element** – identifies the particular country, geographical region, or language area participating in the ISBN system. May be between 1 and 5 digits. US Code is 1
 - **Registrant element** – identifies the publisher or imprint – can be up to 7 numbers
 - **Publication element** – identifies the edition and format of a specific title – maybe up to 6 digits
 - **Check Digit** – the final single digit that mathematically validates the rest of the number

Example: 978-1-942622-12-3

Why do I need one or more?

To sell most commercial books in the US, you need a unique ISBN to identify and track the book. Bookstores and libraries order the books by the ISBN and sales are recorded in the same way.

Each type of book needs an ISBN. Therefore, a hardbound book, with or without jacket, soft cover, eBook, or audio book each needs its own ISBN. (According to the US ISBN Agency.)

Bowker's web site states that you need a unique ISBN for each: hardcover, softcover, ePub (Nook and others), MOBI (Amazon Kindle), PDF, and Audio.

In reality, eBooks do not require an ISBN. For tracking purposes, Amazon assigns an ASIN (Amazon standard book number). Example: B082ZV42PJ

Draft2Digital also assigns a tracking number, like ml5L2W and I would guess other publishers do likewise for eBooks. I use Draft2Digital for my eBooks and they distribute to Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Scribd, Apple iBooks, Tolino, Baker & Taylor, 24 Symbols, & Overdrive, so I don't need to worry about the ISBNs for Barnes and Noble, Apple, or others.

If you decide to print in more than one format – say you publish your novel in a 6x9" paperback and decide you are going to make a large print copy for older eyes, then you need to assign a new ISBN to the larger print copy. The book formatting is tied to the ISBN number so a large print copy will be more pages and larger binding.

If your book is published through a publisher, you won't need to concern yourself with most of the ISBN-related information in this presentation. But it's good to know why your eBook and your print book have different information.

What you need to know is that the publisher is the registrant. So long as your book is available through that publisher, and ever after, it is assigned to the publisher. If you get the book back from the publisher at the end of your contract and want to self-publish it, you need to get a new ISBN, purchased with you as the publisher. You will also show the re-published book as a new edition.

When you self-publish on Amazon, B&N, Draft3Digital, Book Baby or any other publisher that offers a free or discounted ISBN, you are publishing under their imprint. Unless you purchase and register the ISBN numbers under your name or your publishing name, the book will not show you or your press as the registrant.

For Amazon, the publisher field for the free one is registered as "Independently Published."

If you want the ISBN on your e-Book to show as your name or press, you need to use an ISBN to publish the eBook also. Otherwise, Amazon's free ASIN shows them as publisher. And it is only good on Amazon.

That is the ONLY consequence of publishing with a publisher's ISBN. They do not have claim to your book, only to the link on the ISBN number, so it will not jeopardize your legal ownership of the book in any way.

The other thing is that the ISBN and EAN (the full 13-digit number) are used to generate the barcode that is printed on your book. These are used by bookstores and libraries for inventory control, reordering, sales, and who knows what else. You NEED it to sell the books in any other way except out of the back of your car or at a convention or festival or to friends.

If you're printing a limited-edition memoir or cookbook only for family and friends, you don't need an ISBN, but Amazon and other publishing companies will ask for one. Accept the free one.

How do I get an ISBN?

- Free from the Publisher – Amazon, Draft2Digital, and other publishers have blocks they carry as registrant they provide free for you publishing with them.
- Purchase from Bowker or another seller who offers them. Be aware that only Bowker is authorized to sell ISBNs so any you buy from another seller will show that seller as registrant. You also need to be alert to scammers selling fake ISBNs.
- If you live in Canada, you can get them free from the Canadian ISBN agency.
- How much do they cost?
 - You will find some vendors if you search offering ISBNs from as low as \$10 to \$30 per ISBN.
 - Book Baby charges \$39, but it will carry Book Baby as registrant.
 - Bowker is the only one who can sell one to your name or press name. It is not inexpensive. It is the official sales channel of the US ISBN Agency, which is the only source authorized to assign ISBNs to publishers supplying a US address or one in the Virgin Islands, Guam, or Puerto Rico.
 - 1 ISBN = \$125
 - 10 ISBNs = \$295 (\$29.50)
 - 100 ISBNs = \$575 (\$5.75 each)
 - 1000 ISBNs = \$1500 (\$1.50 each) – estimate to handle multi-formats for 200 books.

Suddenly, those free ones look attractive. Amazon, Draft2Digital, and B&N Press (Barnes and Noble) have distribution partners that include libraries and bookstores. This means they can distribute the books through the channels. Check each publisher to see which companies they partner with for distribution.

If you decide to buy a block at Bowker, do what I did. I found a sale on around Christmas and bought 100 for \$250. These are registered under my press name, so I can use them anywhere. So long as I publish the same book in the same format on a different publisher, they pick up and use the ISBN number. It is not linked to Amazon or any other publishing company.

When do I need to get a new ISBN for my book?

- If you change publishers and the publisher is the registrant, the new publisher will probably publish under their own imprint. If you're going to self-publish and want it permanently attached to your name or press, then you need to buy one for it.

- If you make any substantial changes to your book, remove or add sections to it, you need to republish with a new ISBN. It changes the details of your book, more pages or less pages, smaller or larger spine.
- If you change the title of the book or use a significantly different cover, you need to use a new ISBN. Essentially, if it is something a customer would notice, and possibly complain about, then a new ISBN is necessary.
- You do NOT need a new one if you make minor changes or correct spelling errors or typos.

Do I need to Register my ISBN?

If you use one of the free ISBNs, the publisher will take care of registering the book. It goes into a database called Books In Print, which is maintained by Bowker.

If you use your own imprint, you need to register it with Bowker at my.identifiers.com. You'll need to create an account, assign the ISBN # to your novel and complete all the details about the book. Filling out this form is another topic, and I can do that at another meeting if enough people want to know about it.

Questions?

Links to Various Sites Mentioned:

Bowker/Identifier Services: <https://www.myidentifiers.com/>

US ISBN Agency: <http://www.isbn.org/>

Draft2Digital: <https://draft2digital.com/>

Amazon Kindle Publishing: https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/

B&N Publishing (Barnes & Noble): <https://press.barnesandnoble.com/>

Book Baby: <https://www.bookbaby.com/>

Ingram Spark: <https://www.ingramspark.com/>

Kobo: <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/p/writinglife>