



ISBN – FAQ

What is an ISBN, what's it for, and as an author about to publish, do you need one?

What does ISBN stand for?

International Standard Book Number.

What is an ISBN for?

It is a 13-digit identifier for your book which is unique and allows for anyone to find it among all the millions of books that have been published.

Why should I care?

There is no law requiring you to add an ISBN to your book, but if you want your printed book to be found by, and sold by, libraries, bookstores, online retailers, distributors, and wholesalers then you will need one. They won't handle or sell your book without one.

If you are uploading your e-book to Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Apple, you will not be required to add an ISBN. But each store has their own system (Amazon, e.g., has an 'ASIN') and you will find that you can't transfer these store identifiers to other environments, nor sell them in printed format.

This is unduly limiting for most authors, so best to make the investment in an, or a stack of, ISBNs and forget about it, ever after. And as you wrote the book, you deserve to be acknowledged as the publisher of record.



Should I get an ISBN?

You don't need to, if you have a traditional publisher; it's something your publisher will see to, because they want to be your book's publisher of record (when you make the bestseller list).

If you are self-publishing, in my opinion, you should get one because your book deserves to be discovered, and you to be acknowledged as the publisher of record.

If you don't want to spend the money, you have the option of using a number, such as Amazon's ASIN, assigned by your publishing service company, but they will appear as the publisher of record.

Am I buying the ISBN as Author, or Publisher?

Publisher. If you want to be the publisher of record of your own book, in book databases, libraries and catalogues, make sure you apply for your own ISBN.

How do I get hold of an ISBN?

Each country has an agency that issues ISBNs. Go online, gripping your credit card:

- In the UK, go to: Nielsen <https://nielsenbook.co.uk/isbn-agency/>
- In the US, go to: Bowker <http://www.isbn.org>
- In Canada (where they are free), go to: <https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/services/publishers/isbn/Pages/isbn.aspx>
- In Australia, go to: <http://www.myidentifiers.com.au>

Do I need to buy a stack of them?

You need one ISBN for your paperback, and another for the hardcover, and another for the audiobook.



If you want to be able to upload your e-book to some or all of Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Apple (not limit yourself to one) then you will need an ISBN for the eBook version if you want to appear as the publisher of record (and why wouldn't you?).

If you are planning to write subsequent books, it pays to buy a batch of ten.

Does the ISBN last for all the book's life?

If you make no changes to it, yes. But if you make substantial textual changes that would qualify as a new edition, then your book requires a new ISBN.

You also need a new ISBN in the following circumstances:

- If you are changing your publisher
- If you are changing your book title
- If the book is translated into a different language.

Really? As a self-publisher, do I need the hassle?

Let me put it this way. You've just spent probably upwards of a year working on this book of yours. I imagine you will want:

- Control over your book's metadata (descriptions and categories that help libraries, bookstores, and readers worldwide discover your book and decide whether they want to purchase it. As you do not have the marketing and distribution capabilities of a traditional publisher to fall back on, the cost of an ISBN is a small price to pay.
- Continuity. As you will be the publisher of record, your ISBN will remain unchanged even if you publish with multiple companies or use assisted publishing services.
- Contact with any individual or organization who enquires about your book. The ISBN will lead them to you as the publisher of record; better for this to be you than your publishing service company.



- Consistency. If you plan on writing several books, it makes sense to have your own constant publishing imprint on your books.

More reading

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Standard_Book_Number

<https://www.isbn-international.org/agencies>