

AUTHOR RESOURCE GUIDE | FOUNDATIONS

Understanding ISBNs

What an ISBN is, how many you need, where to buy them, and when to own your numbers instead of using free ones.

What Is an ISBN?

An ISBN (International Standard Book Number) is a unique 13-digit number that identifies one specific edition and format of a book, published by one specific publisher. Bookstores, libraries, distributors and online retailers use ISBNs to order, catalog, track and sell books. Think of it as a product number: it tells the book trade exactly which version of your book is being bought.

An ISBN identifies a product; it does not protect your content. An ISBN is not a copyright, and buying one does not register your copyright.

How an ISBN Is Structured

Since 2007, all ISBNs have 13 digits. Older 10-digit ISBNs can be converted to the 13-digit form. Each ISBN is divided into five parts:

Part	Example	Meaning
Prefix	978	Identifies the product as a book. Newer ISBNs may begin with 979.
Registration group	1	The country, region or language area of the issuing agency.
Registrant	234567	The publisher that owns the ISBN (length varies).
Publication element	89	The specific edition and format (length varies).
Check digit	7	A calculated digit that verifies the number is valid.

Illustrative example: 978-1-234567-89-7. Hyphen positions vary by agency and publisher block.

When You Need an ISBN

Every distinct format or edition that is offered for sale needs its own ISBN. A book released as a paperback, hardcover, eBook and audiobook needs four ISBNs.

Situation	New ISBN needed?
Paperback, hardcover, eBook and audiobook versions of the same book	Yes, one for each format
A new edition with substantial content changes (e.g., revised and expanded)	Yes

Situation	New ISBN needed?
A change of title	Yes
A change of publisher or imprint	Yes
Correcting typos or minor errors	No
Changing the price	No
Reprinting the same edition	No
A new cover design on an otherwise unchanged edition	Generally no

For unusual cases, such as a change in trim size or binding style within the same format, check the guidance of your national ISBN agency and your printer.

Where to Get ISBNs

ISBNs are issued by one official agency in each country or region. In the United States and its territories, the official agency is Bowker, which sells ISBNs through its website, myidentifiers.com. Other countries have their own agencies with their own pricing; some, such as Canada, provide ISBNs free of charge to eligible local publishers. The International ISBN Agency website lists the agency for every country.

Bowker pricing in the United States (at the time of writing)

Quantity	Price	Cost per ISBN
1 ISBN	\$125	\$125.00
10 ISBNs	\$295	\$29.50
100 ISBNs	\$575	\$5.75
1,000 ISBNs	\$1,500	\$1.50

Why most authors buy a block of 10

If you publish a paperback and an eBook, you already need two ISBNs, and a single ISBN costs \$125. A block of 10 costs \$295 and covers several formats and future books. ISBNs never expire, so unused numbers remain available for later titles.

Buy ISBNs only from the official agency or an authorized reseller. ISBNs bought from unofficial resellers may list the reseller, not you, as the publisher.

Free ISBNs vs. Owning Your Own

Platforms such as Amazon KDP and IngramSpark offer free ISBNs. These can be a reasonable choice for a first book on a tight budget, but there are trade-offs.

	Platform-assigned (free) ISBN	Your own ISBN
Cost	Free	Purchased from your national agency
Publisher of record	The platform (e.g., "Independently published" on KDP)	You or your imprint name
Portability	Can only be used on the platform that issued it	Can be used on any platform or printer
Professional perception	Can signal a self-published title to bookstores and libraries	Presents your imprint as the publisher
Metadata control	Controlled mainly by the platform	You manage your book's record
Best for	Testing, personal projects, Amazon-only releases	Authors building a catalog or selling to bookstores and libraries

ISBNs for eBooks and Audiobooks

- **Kindle eBooks:** Amazon does not require an ISBN and assigns its own ASIN (Amazon Standard Identification Number) instead.
- **Other eBook retailers and library platforms:** some require an ISBN and others strongly recommend one for consistent discovery. If you distribute widely, assign your own ISBN to the eBook.
- **Audiobooks:** assign a separate ISBN if your distributor requires one or if you want the audiobook listed under your imprint.

ISBNs and Barcodes

A barcode is the scannable representation of your ISBN that appears on the back cover of a print book. Book barcodes use the EAN-13 format, which encodes the ISBN. Many barcodes also include a small five-digit add-on that encodes the price: the first digit identifies the currency (5 for U.S. dollars) and the remaining four give the price, so 51999 means \$19.99. The add-on 90000 means no price is encoded.

- Each format needs its own barcode because each has its own ISBN.
- Amazon KDP can place a barcode on your cover automatically, and IngramSpark provides a free barcode generator, so purchasing a barcode is often unnecessary.
- Leave a clean, uncluttered area on the lower back cover for the barcode (about 2" x 1.2" is a common allowance) and keep it on a white background for reliable scanning.

Where the ISBN Appears in Your Book

- **Copyright page:** list the ISBN for the edition you are printing. Many publishers list all formats, labelled, for example "ISBN 978-1-234567-89-7 (paperback)".
- **Back cover:** the barcode with the ISBN printed above it in human-readable form.
- **eBook:** the eBook's own ISBN on its copyright page, if one is assigned.

Assigning an ISBN: Step by Step

- 1 Decide on your imprint (publisher) name. This name will appear as the publisher of record in book databases.
- 2 Purchase ISBNs from your national agency (Bowker in the U.S.).
- 3 In your agency account, assign one ISBN to each format and enter its metadata: title, subtitle, contributors, format, trim size, page count, price, publication date and description.
- 4 Add the correct ISBN to each edition's copyright page.
- 5 Enter the same ISBN when setting up that edition on your printing and distribution platforms.
- 6 Keep a simple log of which ISBN is assigned to which title and format.

Assignment is permanent

Once an ISBN has been assigned to a published book and circulated in the book trade, it cannot be reused for a different book, even if the original is withdrawn. Double-check each assignment before publishing.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Using the same ISBN for the paperback and the hardcover.
- Using a free KDP ISBN and later trying to use it with IngramSpark or another printer.
- Buying ISBNs from an unofficial reseller that becomes the publisher of record.
- Leaving metadata incomplete or inconsistent between the ISBN agency and the retail platforms.
- Placing text or artwork over the barcode area on the back cover.
- Assuming an ISBN registers or protects your copyright.

ISBN Checklist

- ☐ I have decided on my imprint name.
- ☐ I know how many formats I am publishing and how many ISBNs I need.
- ☐ I have purchased ISBNs from my official national agency, or deliberately chosen a platform ISBN.
- ☐ Each format has its own ISBN, recorded in my ISBN log.
- ☐ Metadata is complete and matches my title page and platform listings.
- ☐ The correct ISBN appears on each edition's copyright page.
- ☐ Each print cover has a clear barcode area and the correct barcode.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does every book need an ISBN?

Every print edition sold through retailers, bookstores or libraries needs one. Kindle-only eBooks do not, although most other eBook channels prefer or require one.

Can I transfer an ISBN to another publisher?

ISBNs are assigned to the publisher that purchased them and generally cannot be sold or transferred for another publisher's book. Contact your ISBN agency for specific situations.

Do ISBNs expire?

No. Purchased ISBNs remain valid until you assign them.

Is an ISBN the same as an LCCN?

No. An ISBN identifies a specific edition for the book trade; an LCCN is a Library of Congress catalog number that helps libraries. Many U.S. self-publishers use both.

This guide is general educational information prepared in September 2026. Platform specifications, fees and program rules change periodically; always confirm current requirements directly with your printer, distributor, ISBN agency or the Library of Congress before finalizing files. This guide is not legal advice.