

Do I need an ISBN to self-publish an ebook? (1340 words)

So, you've written a book, and now it is time to self-publish it. But what about the ISBN number? Do you need one for an ebook? And what even is an ISBN number... and where do you get one?

There is conflicting information and advice online, so let's look at the official source – the [ISBN International Organisation](#) – to answer our questions.

A quick search engine query will most likely indicate that ebooks **don't** need an ISBN number – but beware of hinky online sources, because according to the ISBN organisation handbook, “ISBNs are not only for print books; in fact it is of no relevance in what medium a publication is made available. Provided it is text-based, available to the public and a one-off (not serial) publication then it will qualify for ISBN assignment. ISBNs should be used to identify each separate digital publication (including apps).”

ISBNs provide unique identification for books and simplify the distribution of your books throughout the global supply chain.

Reasons to get an ISBN for a self-published book or ebook include:

1. If you want a hard copy of your book to be sold in bookstores and retail stores – without an ISBN, your book will not be found in most bookstores, either online or in physical stores.
2. If you want your book circulated in libraries, including only as an ebook version
3. If you plan to use a book aggregator company to publish (self-publishing aggregators / digital online distributors are platforms that distribute your book to several online retailers)
4. You can purchase or obtain an ISBN for your book ahead of time, even if it is not published yet, and every version, format and edition will require its own unique ISBN - so it is wise to plan ahead! For example, if a title is available in hardcover, soft cover and as an e-book, three unique ISBN Bookland EAN bar codes are required.

What is an ISBN?

The International Standard Book Number (ISBN) is the standard ID number used by booksellers, libraries, book wholesalers and distributors, to uniquely identify individual books, and each edition of the same book. The ISBN also identifies the publisher of the book. It came about when the book industry needed a standardized tracking program to organize the growing number of titles being published every year.

Fun fact: Due to the large volume of eBooks now published every year (more than 1.1 million), the ISBN is now a 13-digit number. Before 2007, for over thirty years, ISBNs were 10 digits long.

How to get an ISBN for your self published book or ebook:

As a self-publisher, the method to obtain an ISBN is the same as any other publisher and/or author. You can purchase an ISBN or obtain one for free through your self-publishing platform (although this carries some small risk, as can be seen further down in this post).

1. Purchase an ISBN from your regionally-accepted source – for example, [Bowker](#) is the official ISBN Agency for the United States and its territories and Australia.
2. Receive a free ISBN from your self-publishing platform, such as Amazon, Kindle, Nook, etc.

Some important points to bear in mind:

1. Ensure you have only one single unique ISBN number registered to your self-published book or ebook, and not multiple numbers spread out over various platforms.
2. Free ISBNs providers will designate the issuing platform (e.g. Kindle) as the publisher. If you later break the relationship with that platform and decide to distribute your book or ebook elsewhere, you will need to purchase your own new ISBN. It's probably better to buy an ISBN of your own from the start.
3. A publisher or retailer may make a particular e-book title available as “multiple options”, to reach the widest possible market. Although the content will be the same, if a specific device or software is required to read the e-book (e.g. Kobo; Icarus) or different user functionality are offered (e.g. copy, print, lend, etc.) then each separate version will be a distinct product. Each distinct product that is available must be identified by its own ISBN as it is a separate publication.
4. When an e-book is available in enhanced form and includes audio, video or other additional content, it will qualify for ISBN. If the e-book is also available separately without these extra elements then these are different products and should therefore have separate ISBNs.
5. Once assigned to a book, an ISBN can never be reused. If you republish your book, or publish it in another format, ISBNs are non-transferable. One ISBN per book only.

If this is starting to sound confusing, contact us at [Word-2-Kindle](#), and we will be very happy to sort all of this out for you!

Decoding your ISBN – what do the numbers show?

It is possible to find out all about a book, its author and its publisher by knowing how to read the ISBN number.

The 13 digit ISBN number is broken up into 5 parts that identify the following:

1. **Book Code Digits:** The first three digits “978” indicate that this string of numbers is for an ISBN. Note: the United States ISBN Agency will soon begin assigning ISBNs starting with the prefix element 979 (in addition to the ISBNs with prefix element 978 that they currently assign). This is necessary because the inventory of certain ISBN block sizes starting with 978, such as 10,000, 100,000 and 1,000,000, are dwindling. Of course, as with the 978-0 and 978-1, an ISBN starting with 979-8 will allow U.S. publishers and self-publishers to market their books anywhere in the world.
2. **The language the book is written in:** The language for an English version is identified with a “0” or “1”. You can reference this complete list at the [International ISBN Agency](#).

3. **The publisher** of this book
4. **The book title, current edition, and book format:** The six-digit series represents the title of the book. An ISBN identifies a given title and its edition and binding for all time. Even if out of print, it will still exist in some shops, and will certainly still exist in libraries.
5. **Check Digit:** “0” is the last digit and is known as the “check digit”. This number is mathematically calculated as a fixed, single digit.

Where to put the ISBN on an ebook?

Your ebook ISBN should be placed at the bottom of the copyright page located in the front of your book, near the title page.

However, bear in mind that the ISBN is administered by a private company for the use of the international book trade, while US **copyright** is administered by the Library of Congress and is an extension of intellectual property law... so having an ISBN is not directly connected to the book’s copyright status.

How much does an ISBN cost?

An option is to buy one single ISBN on [Bowker](#). However, if you ever publish another edition of your book, or another book entirely, you will need more than one ISBN. If you are planning on creating more books, then purchasing their 10-pack bundle would be the less expensive option. You may also find that the prices of ISBNs purchased internationally vary (and are sometimes cheaper).

Remember: ISBNs do not expire.

If you were to use say three ISBNs for each book per language, you could use up a purchased block of ten ISBNs very quickly if publishing regularly. The number may also depend on whether you are assigning an ISBN to your ebook as well as to the printed versions.

If you write just one single book and you don’t have plans to create any more, then one ISBN will probably do. But for career authors, it may be wise to consider your long-term strategy.

Additional resources for researching ISBNs:

- [International ISBN Agency](#)
- [ISBN.org by Bowker](#)
- [Bowkerlink Publisher Access System](#)
- [Bowker Identifier Services](#)
- [U.S. Copyright Office](#)
- [ISBN Set Up Guide](#)
- [ISBN Guides: Basic Information](#)
- [SmashWords ISBN Manager](#)
- [ISBN Canada: Library and Archives Canada](#)