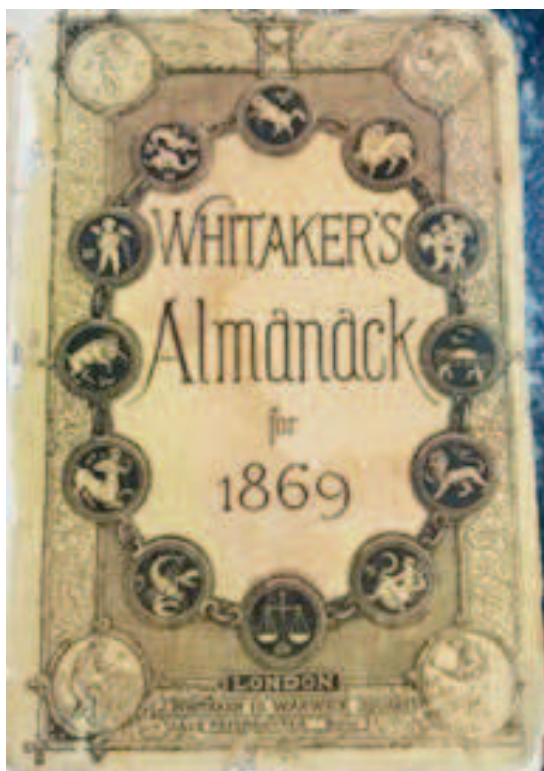


To begin with a statistic is very 2019, but metrics are king these days, and nonetheless it demonstrates how crucial the ISBN is to the entire book trade. In 2018, 190.9m print books were sold through UK booksellers to the tune of £1.63bn. Those sales were tracked thanks to a 13-digit number. This simple number helps publishers, distributors and booksellers to identify and track stock and sales of each book sold.

The ISBN, or International Standard Book Number to give its full title, goes all the way back to 1965 when WHSmith challenged Gordon Foster, Emeritus Professor of Statistics at Trinity College, Dublin to come up with an algorithm to help booksellers track books. The first ISBN was generated in 1967 in the United Kingdom by David Whitaker, a man widely regarded as the "Father of the ISBN".

What started as a 10-digit format identifier (and became 13 digits in 2007) was developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and was published in 1970 as International Standard ISO 2108.

Today the International ISBN Agency, appointed by ISO, is the registration authority for the Standard on a global basis. They're a not for profit organisation, based in London who promote, co-ordinate and supervise the ISBN system globally and provide guidance to ISBN Agencies and other users.



From the beginning, Whitaker was tasked with managing the system for the UK. In the archive we inherited when Whitaker was merged into Nielsen we found an Almanac from 1869, and letters from the likes of Dennis Wheatley and Daphne Du Maurier, although the one from Lewis Carol is mysteriously missing! It has to be said not all were complimentary although unfailingly polite, such as Ms Du Maurier's polite decline of the request to write an article for the literary magazine.

The privilege of running the UK ISBN Agency is licensed to Nielsen Book Services by the International ISBN Agency to supply ISBNs to publishers in the UK & Ireland, plus 14 British overseas territories including Anguilla, the Falkland Islands, Tristan da Cunha and Akrotiri and Dhekelia. Occasionally we are asked by the International Agency to help out publishers in countries where there isn't an Agency, which brings a little excitement to our day as they are usually countries one wouldn't normally get to visit such as Liberia, Syria and Iraq - although Iraq now boasts its own ISBN Agency.

As an ISBN Agency we allocate ISBN Publisher Prefixes to eligible publishers and as a result Nielsen Book maintains a rather large database of publishers (over 60,000) with their prefixes and supply

UK & Ireland information to the Publishers International ISBN Directory.

We promote the importance of the ISBN for a proper listing of titles with bibliographic agencies and we also provide technical advice and assistance to the book trade on all aspects of correct ISBN usage. Above all we are required to maintain the ISO Standard, you could say we are the guardians of the ISO Standard 2108 in the UK & Ireland and our 14 British overseas territories.

How can an algorithm devised in the 1960s possibly still be relevant in 2019?

Well, for one thing the ISBN is easily recognisable as the identifier for all kinds of books. Data is fundamental to the book trade so the ISBN makes it easy for data recipients to process information and get books and their metadata into databases quickly. This in turn helps the supply chain to run effectively and efficiently. In short, the ISBN system benefits all participants.

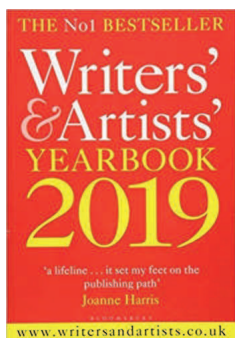
How is an ISBN formulated?



The ISBN is broken into five elements.

- **Bookland Prefix:** shows that the product identifier is a book – it is “from” Bookland
- **Registration Group:** identifies a country, area or language area where the publisher is based and the ISBN is assigned
- **Registrant (Publisher) identifier:** identifies a particular publisher and usually indicates the exact identification of the publishing house and its address
- **Title Identifier:** identifies a specific edition of a publication of a specific publisher
- **Check Digit:** validates the full number

Here’s an ISBN in action:



Writers and Artists Yearbook 2019
978-1-4729-4749-9

Area Code for Anglophone area (UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, USA) – 978-1
Publisher number for Bloomsbury – 4729
Title number – 4749
Check Digit– 9

The ISBN revolves around best practice, but does that still matter? The simple answer is yes! ISBNs identify unique products, the publisher and the imprint, and the location of the publisher. ISBNs are also permanent: once assigned that ISBN identifies that book and format for life!

How ISBNs are used

An ISBN contains only a small, but crucial, amount of data but it can be used as a key to unlock the data held on book databases. On the Nielsen Book database, for example, a single book record can have over 500 data elements!

A widely held belief is that ISBN protects copyright. It doesn't, it is an identifier and copyright is the author's. In general, publishers don't tend to buy copyrights for books. They *license* the copyrights, which the author retains.

The **Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works**, usually known as the **Berne Convention**, is an international agreement governing copyright, which was first accepted in Berne, Switzerland, in 1886. The Berne Convention formally mandated several aspects of modern copyright law; it introduced the concept that a copyright exists the moment a work is "fixed", rather than requiring registration. It also enforces a requirement that countries recognise copyrights held by the citizens of all other parties to the convention. If the country in which you are based is a signatory of this agreement, it means that you have automatic copyright. However, you can find out more from the UK Intellectual Property Office (www.ipo.gov.uk).

Copyright covers works fixed in a tangible format, but book titles don't fall under copyright protection because they tend to be too short, so cannot be copyrighted (although they can be trademarked). Consequently a single book title may have many incarnations, and it is the ISBN that differentiates the various titles, formats and editions.

For example, books titled '*Great Expectations*' - Dickens novel, report on schooling in Rwanda, Australian politics, the tourism industry, delivery in health systems, graduate careers, the Toronto Blue Jays' 2013 failed season, the psychology of money and marriage and divorce in post-Victorian America.

Retailers buy data from Nielsen Book for their stock control and ordering databases. Using the ISBN they can differentiate between all incarnations of a title, in order to keep prices and availability accurate and updated.

The largest group purchasing ISBNs today are those who identify themselves as self-published authors. Unfortunately many get to the printing stage before realising they need an ISBN, which prompts the question, "What's an ISBN?".

The internet is the first port of call for many publishing for themselves, so they often come to us frustrated by many false starts and misinformation. We aim to help point them in the right direction in what is often their first time releasing their creation into a professional and commercial environment. We advise on best practice, new imprints, changes of publishing name, title registration, etc. If they don't need an ISBN because they are selling the book themselves and not via the book supply chain, we try to guide them that their £89 could be better spent elsewhere. Many prefer to have an ISBN though because they believe it completes their book and also means they can submit a copy to the British Library, something they're very proud to do.

A typical day could involve advising someone who is producing a book to raise money for a church roof, untangling a multinational publisher's plethora of imprints or explaining to an individual who wishes to publish their series of nine books that an independent proof-reader might be a good idea. Speaking to a wide variety of authors and publishers makes every day different.

While we can advise on best practice, a new publisher has to consider the following questions when deciding whether they need an ISBN:

- Do you want your books to be discovered?
- Do you want to sell books?
- Do you want to analyse sales?

ISBN in libraries

As a library user if I wanted to order a book on interlibrary loan at my local library I would always give them the ISBNs for both hardback and paperback editions. The library staff are always grateful for that piece of information as it helps them to find the item(s) quicker on their system.

Searching by title, author and keyword may bring up multiple results but searching by specific ISBN should only bring up one result. As libraries become more digital, the ISBN is a powerful tool for locating a specific title. Traditionally it was straight forward to locate a book by author, title or subject heading using the old card catalogue system but in the age of online databases the ISBN has become a very useful field. They are used throughout the world and being totally numeric it is something that most people would be familiar with no matter which country they are from and what language they speak. So the universal nature of ISBN makes it a good access point for search and retrieval.

The ISBN also allows Nielsen Book to measure loans in the UK and match them to the sales of the book to get a fuller picture of an author's readership. For example, the hardback of *The Midnight Line* by Lee Child, ISBN 978-0-5930-7818-1 published by Transworld in 2017, was the most borrowed title of 2018, with nearly 27,000 patrons taking it home throughout the year from the branches we measure, and a further 16,000 copies were purchased in that time in the UK. While the hardback proved more popular at libraries, the paperback, ISBN 978-0-85750-361-9, was released in 2018 and garnered more sales, reaching nearly 355,000 copies sold and 9,000 borrowed, according to data from Nielsen Book Research.

How you can purchase ISBNs in the UK

The ISBN is geo-specific meaning that if you are based in the UK or Ireland and want to publish your book you should contact the UK ISBN Agency. However, if you are English but living and publishing in Spain, we would not be able to help you, but the Spanish agency could! It still surprises me how many agencies there are in the world, so wherever you are publishing from you should be able to find an ISBN agency near you, and if not, the International Agency will be happy to help.

As a national Agency, we are accessible to all, so by visiting our Online Store ISBNs can be purchased immediately 24/7, as 81% of our customers do already. It's the fastest and most popular way to purchase either a single ISBN or larger allocations, up to a block of 1,000, and also includes access to other Nielsen Book services. We also offer a manual application, found on our website, which is a significantly slower service, but can be requested for a multitude of reasons, such as different payment preferences or allocations larger than 1,000.

Nielsen Book provides a range of services to the book industry internationally, aiding the discovery and purchase, distribution and sales measurement of books. We are proud to run the ISBN and SAN Agencies for UK & Ireland as well as providing search and discovery services for booksellers and libraries. The electronic trading solutions, including Nielsen PubEasy, help everyone involved in the book supply chain trade more easily.

Our Research services provide retail sales analysis for both print and e-books alongside research from Nielsen's Books and Consumers Survey. For publishers, we offer a range of services from assigning an ISBN to your book to adding your metadata to our database and promotional tools to help market your book.

As your local, friendly ISBN Agency we are happy to offer advice and guidance to publishers large and small, new and established.

isbn.agency@nielsen.com

www.nielsenisbnstore.com