



ISBN

An ISBN (International Standard Book Number) is the unique identifier for your book. It tells retailers, libraries, and distributors exactly which edition they're dealing with, format, publisher, and version. You don't always need to buy one yourself, but you *do* need to understand what your choice means for the future of your book.

A Quick Prompt to Get You Started

Ask yourself: *Do I want to be the publisher of record, or am I happy for the platform to be listed instead?*

Your answer will guide whether you buy your own ISBN or use a free one.

Using a Free ISBN (e.g., KDP, Kobo, Draft2Digital)

Many self-publishing platforms offer free ISBNs. They're convenient and cost nothing.

Advantages

- no upfront cost
- quick and easy
- automatically assigned during setup

Things to Be Aware Of

- the platform becomes the publisher of record
- you can't use that ISBN on other platforms
- switching platforms later means a new ISBN
- some bookstores and libraries prefer books with publisher-owned ISBNs

Free ISBNs are perfectly fine for many self-published authors, especially for digital-only books or early projects.

Buying Your Own ISBN

If you want full control, you can purchase your own ISBNs from the official agency in your country (e.g., Nielsen in the UK, Bowker in the US).

Advantages

- *you* are the publisher of record
- you can use the same ISBN across multiple platforms
- more professional for print distribution
- easier to expand into bookstores or libraries

Things to Be Aware Of

- ISBNs cost money (often cheaper in blocks)
- each format needs its own ISBN
 - paperback
 - hardback
 - ebook (sometimes optional depending on platform)
- you become responsible for metadata and registration

Buying your own ISBN is a long-term investment if you plan to publish multiple books. They are generally significantly cheaper if bought in bulk.

Do You Need an ISBN for Ebooks?

- KDP doesn't require one for Kindle Ebooks, they use their own ASIN system.
- Other platforms may require an ISBN for Ebooks, but many accept their own internal identifiers.

If you want your Ebook available *everywhere*, having your own ISBN keeps things simple.

Which Option Should You Choose?

- If you want maximum control and future flexibility → buy your own.
- If you're publishing only on KDP and want to keep costs low → use the free one.
- If you're experimenting with your first book → free is fine.
- If you plan to build a catalogue or brand → owning your ISBNs is worth it.

There's no wrong choice, just the choice that fits your goals.

A Simple Exercise

Write two short notes:

1. Where do I want my book to be sold?
2. Do I want to be listed as the publisher?

Your answers will make the ISBN decision clear.

A Final Thought

An ISBN doesn't make a book professional, the writing and presentation do.

But choosing the right ISBN path helps your book travel exactly where you want it to go.