

ISBN, Barcode & Distribution Primer

The boring administrative bones of getting a book into the world — and why they matter.

What an ISBN is

An ISBN — International Standard Book Number — is a unique 13-digit identifier assigned to a specific edition of a specific book. Every physical, audio, and ebook edition of a title gets its own ISBN. The ISBN is what retailers, wholesalers, libraries, and reviewers use to identify and order your book.

Without an ISBN, your book essentially does not exist in the commercial book ecosystem. It cannot be ordered by bookstores. It cannot be cataloged by libraries. It cannot be reviewed by trade publications.

Where to get one

In the United States, ISBNs are sold exclusively by Bowker (myidentifiers.com). A single ISBN costs about \$125. A block of ten costs \$295, which is cheaper if you plan to publish multiple titles or editions.

Amazon KDP and other self-publishing platforms offer free ISBNs, but these are owned by the platform and lock the book to their distribution. If you may ever move the book elsewhere, buy your own.

How retail barcodes work

The barcode on the back of a book is an EAN-13 encoding of the ISBN, sometimes with a five-digit price extension. Retailers scan the barcode at point of sale. The barcode is generated free by Bowker once you have an ISBN; many printing services include it automatically.

Place the barcode in the lower-right corner of the back cover. Keep the area around it clear of art. Bookstores will refuse to shelve books with an obstructed or non-scannable barcode.

Distribution channels

Online retail. Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Apple Books, Kobo. Reach by far the widest. KDP and IngramSpark together cover almost every online channel.

Physical bookstores. Bookstores order through wholesalers, primarily Ingram and Baker & Taylor. To be ordered, your book must be listed in their catalogs, available with standard returnability, and discounted at the trade standard (40–55% off list).

Libraries. Libraries order through Baker & Taylor, Brodart, and OverDrive. They also rely heavily on review attention from *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and *Kirkus*. Library editions are typically hardcover.

Direct sales. Selling from your own site (or your publisher's) gives the highest per-copy revenue but requires you to handle fulfillment.

How 1123 Publishing handles this for its authors

When a book joins the 1123 list, we handle ISBN registration in the imprint's name, barcode placement, metadata registration with Ingram and Bowker, distribution setup with both online and brick-and-mortar wholesalers, and library catalog submission. Authors keep their share of net royalties and never see an invoice for any of the production work.

Whether you publish with us or go it alone, the ISBN and distribution infrastructure is what turns a manuscript into a book the world can actually buy. Treat it as seriously as you treat the writing.