

ISBNs

It's all but impossible to sell a book in a bookshop today if it doesn't have an ISBN – full name International Standard Book Number. ISBNs are those long numbers that appear on the reverse cover of a book, and in tiny print somewhere on the 'Copyright Page', which is the reverse of the title page*.

Once, ISBNs had ten digits but nowadays they generally have thirteen. Technically, they're separated in places with hyphens, but despite anything anyone else might say it's really only the figures that count. Try searching for a particular book in Waterstones online store using the hyphens and see where it gets you. The main purpose of an ISBN is to allow for efficient stocktaking – hence bookshops demand it – and so there's invariably a barcode representation of the ISBN of the back cover of the book, too. As the book is swiped at the till, it registers a sale, not just within the store's own system but also internationally, which is how sales are recorded and 'bestsellers' are identified. Publishers are expected to maintain information on their ISBNs responsibly, so that new editions, changes of cover, new information about a book's contents or its author, even prizes that it's won, are all kept up-to-date. In the UK, ISBNs are issued and monitored by Nielsen, in the US it's done by Bowker, and in Canada it's the government itself. Each has its own rules, sets its own prices. Nielsen insists that ISBNs are purchased in batches of at least 10 (currently £132), but the more you buy, the cheaper it gets. Large publishers buy them in thousands, which costs around two pence per ISBN. Nielsen won't dish out ISBNs until they're satisfied that the publisher knows what they're doing, so the first batch is more expensive than subsequent ones, and publishers have to submit a sample – the first few pages of a book, including its Title Page and Copyright Page – for approval first. In addition, they won't issue ISBNs for ebooks, so anyone who wishes to set up as a publisher – or to self-publish – has to do so in print first time around.

Each edition has to have a new ISBN, and each change to the cover or price needs a new ISBN as well, so it's possible to use them up quite quickly. Good advice for small publishers and self-publishers is to assume you'll use four or five times as many ISBNs as you think you will; you'll save a lot of money in the end.

Once you have your supply of ISBNs, remember that they're unique identifiers. They can't be re-used or recycled, so if you publish a book and discover you've made an error with the title, the cover or whatever, you're stuck with it. ISBNs are managed online nowadays, though, so you can do the whole process from your home PC. When you allocate one of your batch of ISBNs to a title, you'll be taken through a process where you're asked for details of the book's title, its author and its publisher. If you like, you can subdivide your publications by giving them an 'imprint'; so as well as 'Comely Bank Publishing', we might well have a crime fiction sub-group called 'Comely Bank Crime'. It's a marketing tool, really. You'll need to set a price, too, and as far as I can see that set price can't be altered by the publisher for that edition. That's important because you have to make sure your cover price doesn't lose you money now *or in the future*. Think before you do this.

In addition, you'll be asked to categorise your book. That means you'll be asked to say if it's fiction or non-fiction, what type it is, and to categorise what your book is about. In addition you'll be asked *where* your book is set. All this information is useful to booksellers, who use it to decide which shelves in their shops your book should appear. If you write

* Just for clarification, the first four pages of most books will be:-

Page 1 (on the right): The Half-Title page – just the title, in smaller print.

Page 2 (left/reverse of Half-Title page): blank

Page 3 (right, opposite blank page 2): Title Page – large title, author's name, publisher

Page 4 (left/reverse of Title Page): all that small-print stuff including publication date, claim to copyright, etc..

historical fiction, you don't want your book on the comedy shelves. You must give particular attention to detail if your book is aimed at children, so that booksellers can tell what age group it's aimed at, what its reading levels are and so on. For obvious reasons, parents need to feel that the books their children are reading are suitable; that's the publisher's responsibility.

Finally, you have to set a date for publication. Think about the time of year it should come out; think about how you're going to publicise it; think about who will review your book; and how long it'll take you to get it into shops. In the last case, there's no reason to expect bookshops will take your book at all – after all, it just gathers dust on their shelves if it doesn't sell. It all takes time, and there's a good case for having a 'launch date' some time in the future to allow for all these things to be sorted out, and also it allows you more time to spot any problems with your book. All booksellers will look up the ISBN on their systems for all that information, including where they can obtain copies if they decide to order, especially if a customer comes in and places a 'special order' in their shop.

'Review Copies' are free copies of your book which are handed out, or sent out to booksellers, newspapers, magazines, even book festivals. One convention which is quite common is to rip out the title page (and therefore the copyright page on its reverse) and to scrub out the barcode ISBN on the back cover. That means the book can't be described as 'published' even although you've printed copies, and it means reviewers can comment on what you're about to let loose on the reading public.

One last point. UK law requires that copies of any book with an ISBN must be sent to the six 'Legal Libraries' – the British Library, the National Library of Scotland and so on. Other countries have similar requirements. Fortunately, in the UK you can send them all to the one library if you want.

So, ISBNs have many important uses in the book trade. Treat them with respect, and if you're stuck ask for advice (email me if you want). Nielsen are actually very helpful to newbies, and it's in their interests that you get it right, too.

© Gordon Lawrie 2014

