



# ISBN Decision Guide

*Free platform ISBN or your own? Decide once, the right way.*

## CHOOSE WITH CONFIDENCE

A plain-English guide to what an ISBN is, when you need one, and whether to use a free platform ISBN or buy your own. Walk the decision flow, then record your choice on the tracker.

### WHAT'S INSIDE

- What an ISBN is
- Do you even need one?
- Free vs. your own
- Decision flow
- How many you need
- Recommendation
- ISBN tracker
- Related calculators

## START HERE

# How to use this resource

Understand it, then choose free vs. your own – on purpose.

### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

1. Read 'What an ISBN is' and 'Do you need one' first – they rule out a lot.
2. Use the comparison table to weigh free vs. owning your own.
3. Follow the decision flow to a recommendation that fits your goals.
4. Record every ISBN and the format it belongs to on the tracker page.

*Figures shown are illustrative teaching examples. Printing costs, royalty rates, fees, and discount terms change over time and vary by platform, trim size, and territory – always confirm current numbers in your publishing dashboard and with the matching SimpleLifeCalc calculator.*

## What an ISBN actually is

An **ISBN** (International Standard Book Number) is a unique 13-digit ID for one **format** of one **edition** of a book. It's how stores, libraries, and distributors order and track your title. It is *not* copyright, and it does not register your rights.

### TIP

One title can need several ISBNs: the paperback, the hardcover, and (sometimes) the ebook are each a separate format = separate ISBN. The same book in a new edition with major changes needs a new one too.

## Need one? Free or your own?

Two questions answer most of this: print or ebook, and Amazon-only or wide.

### Do you even need one?

**OFTEN NO**

Ebook only, sold through Amazon/Apple/Kobo – they assign their own free identifiers (ASIN, etc.).

**USUALLY YES**

Any print book – paperback or hardcover almost always needs an ISBN to be ordered and shelved.

**YES**

Selling into bookstores, libraries, or wide distribution – a proper ISBN is expected.

### Free platform ISBN vs. owning your own

|                        | FREE PLATFORM ISBN                            | YOUR OWN ISBN                              |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Cost                   | \$0   | ~\$125 for one; ~\$295 for 10 (US, Bowker) |
| Listed publisher       | The platform (e.g. 'Independently published') | Your own imprint name                      |
| Works across platforms | No – tied to that platform                    | Yes – use anywhere                         |
| Good for               | Amazon-only authors testing the waters        | Authors building a brand / going wide      |
| Resale / control       | Limited                                       | Full control of the record                 |

*Mechanics and prices vary by country and registrar and change over time – confirm current terms before buying.*

## Decision flow & example

### Decision flow

- Is this an **ebook only**, sold only on major retailers? → You can usually skip a paid ISBN.
- Is this a **print** book? → You need an ISBN for that format.
- Are you **Amazon-only** and fine being listed as 'Independently published'? → A free KDP ISBN is okay.
- Do you want your **own imprint** shown, or to go **wide** (IngramSpark, bookstores)? → Buy your own ISBN.
- Multiple formats (paperback + hardcover + audio)? → One ISBN **per format**.

#### WORKED EXAMPLE — RIVERSTONE PRESS

Riverstone wants its own imprint shown and plans to go wide via IngramSpark, plus a hardcover later.

Decision: **buy a block of 10 ISBNs** (~\$295) — assign one to the paperback now, reserve the rest for the hardcover and future titles.

Buying a block lowers the per-ISBN cost dramatically vs. buying singles.

#### WATCH OUT

Never reuse one ISBN across formats to save money — it breaks ordering and reporting, and stores may reject the title.

## How many & your tracker

Budget the right count, then log each ISBN to its format.

### How many ISBNs to budget for

| PLAN                          | FORMATS   | ISBNS NEEDED       |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Ebook only (major retailers)  | Ebook     | 0 (free IDs)       |
| Paperback only                | Paperback | 1                  |
| Paperback + ebook             | Both      | 1-2                |
| Paperback + hardcover + ebook | Three     | 2-3                |
| Series / multiple titles      | Many      | Buy a block of 10+ |

### ISBN tracker

| FORMAT / EDITION          | ISBN | DATE ASSIGNED |
|---------------------------|------|---------------|
| Paperback                 |      |               |
| Hardcover                 |      |               |
| Ebook (if used)           |      |               |
| Large print / 2nd edition |      |               |

Keep this list current – you'll reference it for every retailer setup.

## GO FURTHER

# Related SimpleLifeCalc Tools

Helpful companions to this resource – not required, just faster.

ISBN choices feed straight into your budget and your earnings – these keep those numbers honest.

### **Publishing Cost Calculator**

**WHAT IT DOES** Rolls ISBN and other one-time costs into a budget.

**WHEN TO USE** After you decide free vs. buying a block.

**WHY IT HELPS** Shows whether a block of 10 pays off across titles.

### **Self-Publishing Profit Calculator**

**WHAT IT DOES** Models earnings across platforms and formats.

**WHEN TO USE** When deciding Amazon-only vs. wide.

**WHY IT HELPS** Owning ISBNs only matters if going wide earns more.

### **KEEP THEM HANDY**

Every calculator is free at SimpleLifeCalc.com – bookmark the two or three you'll use most so your numbers stay current.