SIMPLELIFECALC PUBLISHING TOOLKIT

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.

DECIDE

Compare

Need one? Free or your own?

Two questions answer most of this: print or ebook, and which service(s) will supply each print edition.

Do you even need one?

VARIES	Ebook only — ISBN requirements vary by platform and market. Some ebook stores use their own identifier (Amazon uses an ASIN); some services and markets ask for an ISBN. Check each one.
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 ISBNs vs. owning your own

	KDP FREE ISBN	INGRAMSPARK FREE ISBN	PUBLISHER-OWNED ISBN
Cost	$0	$0	US (Bowker): $125 for one; $295 for 10 — current US pricing when checked
Availability	Print only, where KDP offers it	Only where currently offered (current US eligibility)	From your country's ISBN agency
Where it works	KDP only	IngramSpark only	Across publishing services, for the same ISBN-identified product
Listed publisher	Platform-associated (e.g. 'Independently published')	Carries the platform-associated imprint / record	Your imprint — you control the registrant record
Reuse elsewhere	Cannot be reused on IngramSpark	Cannot be reused on KDP	Yes — for that same product
Good for	A KDP-only print title	An IngramSpark-only title	One print product on both KDP and IngramSpark, or building your own imprint

Prices shown are current US Bowker pricing when checked (2026); other countries use their own agencies, prices and rules. ISBN identity principles (one ISBN per format/edition) and each platform's acceptance rules are different authorities — confirm both before you buy or assign.

DECIDE

Flow

Decision flow & example

Decision flow

- [ ] Is this a **print** book? → Each print format needs its own ISBN.
- [ ] Will that print edition go through **KDP only**? → A free KDP ISBN works — on KDP only.
- [ ] Will it go through **IngramSpark only**? → A free IngramSpark ISBN, where currently offered, works — on IngramSpark only.
- [ ] Do you want the **same print product** on both KDP and IngramSpark, or your **own imprint** shown? → Use a publisher-owned ISBN.
- [ ] Is it an **ebook**? → Requirements vary by platform and market — check each one.
- [ ] **Multiple formats** (paperback + hardcover + audio)? → One ISBN **per format**.

WORKED EXAMPLE — RIVERSTONE PRESS

Riverstone wants its own imprint shown and plans to supply the same paperback through both KDP and IngramSpark, plus a hardcover later.

Decision: **buy a block of 10 ISBNs** ($295, current US Bowker pricing when checked) — 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. A free platform ISBN can't follow the book to another service later, so choose before you publish.

RECORD

Track

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	Ebook	Varies by platform / market
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 KDP-only, IngramSpark-only, or both.

WHY IT HELPS Shows whether using both services — which needs a publisher-owned ISBN for a shared print product — is worth it.

KEEP THEM HANDY

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