



BISG Policy Statement POL-1101

Best Practices for Identifying Digital Products

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BEST PRACTICES FOR IDENTIFYING DIGITAL PRODUCTS

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Table of Contents

POLICY SCOPE & OBJECTIVE	3
POLICY IMPLEMENTATION	3
BACKGROUND	3
DEFINITIONS	4
Book.....	4
Physical Book.....	4
Digital Book	4
Identifier.....	4
Consumer	4
ISBN (International Standard Book Number).....	4
GENERAL RULES FOR ISBN ASSIGNMENT	5
BEST PRACTICES FOR IDENTIFYING DIGITAL PRODUCTS	5
Special Note on Metadata and Sales Tracking	6
Best Practices	6
Examples.....	8
APPENDIX A	12
List of companies that participated in BISG’s Identification of E-Books Working Group	12

POLICY SCOPE & OBJECTIVE

This BISG Policy Statement on recommendations for identifying digital products is applicable to content intended for distribution to the general public in North America but could be applied elsewhere as well. The objective of this Policy Statement is to clarify best practices and outline responsibilities in the assignment of ISBNs to digital products in order to reduce both confusion in the market place, and the possibility of errors.

This BISG Policy Statement has been endorsed by the following organizations:

- [BookNet Canada](#), a not-for-profit agency dedicated to innovation in the Canadian book supply chain,
- [National Information Standards Organization](#) (NISO), where content publishers, libraries, and software developers turn for information industry standards that allow them to work together, and
- [IBPA](#), the Independent Book Publishers Association

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

BISG recommends implementation of this Policy Statement as soon as practical, with a target for new product introductions of no later than March 2012.

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2010, the BISG Identification Committee created a Working Group to research and gather data around the practice of assigning identifiers to digital content throughout the US supply chain. The specific mandate of the Working Group was to gather a true picture of how the US book supply chain was handling ISBN assignments, and then formulate best practice recommendations based on this pragmatic understanding. A list of companies that participated in this Working Group can be found in Appendix A of this Policy Statement.

To that end, the Working Group created a framework for a survey to be administered to a broad cross-section of supply chain partners. Michael Cairns of Information Media Partners was hired to conduct the survey and present its findings to Working Group members. The Working Group spent several months reviewing the survey findings and mapping the route digital book content takes through the supply chain (from publisher to end consumer) before drafting the recommendations contained in this Policy Statement.

Regardless of the specific recommendations outlined here, perhaps the most important item to stress is the need for direct communication among trading partners. Most of the problems discovered by BISG's Identification Committee surrounding the misapplication of ISBNs to digital content resulted from a lack of communication. In many cases, trading partners admitted to taking whatever metadata was given them and doing whatever manual manipulation was needed to get a job done, then moving on. In an environment experiencing this level of turbulent growth and change, a lack of communication and collaboration could have long-lasting and harmful effects.

DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this Policy Statement, the following definitions have been used. BISG's Identification Committee recognizes that these definitions may not exactly match those used within a particular company.

Book

A package including textual and/or illustrative content, physical or digital, that is made available to the public, whether for sale or gratis, by a specific producer. For the purposes of this Policy Statement, the definition of *Book* is limited to its role as a product within the supply chain.

Physical Book

A combination of title, publisher, content, physical media, edition and format normally determines a separate *Physical Book* unique from all others.

Digital Book

A combination of title, publisher, content, edition, file format, device applicability and usage rights normally determines a separate *Digital Book* unique from all others.

Identifier

An identifier, generally a sequence of alpha-numeric characters, unambiguously differentiates one thing from another in a particular context. The identifier for a *Book* in a supply chain, physical or digital, is an ISBN (International Standard Book Number).

Consumer

A *Consumer* is a member of the general public who initiates a final transaction (buy, borrow, etc.) from a vendor (retailer, library, etc.).

ISBN (International Standard Book Number)

An ISBN (International Standard Book Number – ISO 2108:2005) is the identifier used for a *Book*, physical or digital, and other *Book*-like products (audio book, for example). An ISBN identifies the registrant as well as the specific title, edition and format of the *Book*. It is mainly used within the supply chain for ordering, listing, sales tracking and stock control purposes.

(NOTE: There are other applications of the ISBN outside the supply chain, which are outside the scope of this Policy Statement.)

GENERAL RULES FOR ISBN ASSIGNMENT

- ISBNs are assigned, not created. One ISBN registration agency per country, or community, is designated by the International ISBN Agency to assign and distribute ISBNs to the publishers and self-publishers located in that area. Any number identified as an ISBN must be a valid ISBN obtained from an officially sanctioned ISBN registration agency such as [R.R. Bowker](#), the United States ISBN Agency, or [Library and Archives Canada](#), the Canadian ISBN Agency. At no time should a random or unsanctioned number be created and identified as an ISBN by any member of the supply chain.
- ISBNs for *Digital Books* should be labeled “ISBN”, not “eISBN.” There is no such standard as an “eISBN”, nor is this the proper way to differentiate *Digital Book* formats.
- *Digital Books* should never be identified with a number that is in the same format as an ISBN or labeled “ISBN” unless that number is a legitimate ISBN issued by an official ISBN registration agency, such as R.R. Bowker in the US.
- *Digital Books* should not be assigned the same ISBN as any *Physical Book*.
- *Digital Books* of the same title but different file format (i.e., EPUB, PDF, etc.) and/or different usage rights should not be assigned or display the same ISBN:
 - Assigning and/or displaying the same ISBN can confuse *Consumers* and/or result in the delivery of an incorrect product.
 - Assigning and/or displaying the same ISBN can affect the proper cataloging of the title by libraries and registration agencies.
- Ideally, identical *Digital Books* (i.e. an EPUB being sold on various vendor sites) should **not** carry different ISBNs. There must be a differentiating factor (or factors) in the *Digital Book’s* content, file format, usage rights or metadata to justify the assignment of a unique ISBN.

BEST PRACTICES FOR IDENTIFYING DIGITAL PRODUCTS

Overview

It is critical that publishers maintain and disseminate accurate metadata about their *Digital Books* when releasing those *Digital Books* to the supply chain. The best way to ensure that product metadata is communicated and maintained through the supply chain is for the metadata to be associated with a valid *Identifier*.

Publishers should always assign a unique ISBN to the separate *Digital Books* that they release into the supply chain in order to maintain a link by which metadata and sales information can be communicated back and forth.

If a third party recipient makes the *Digital Book* available down the supply chain without alteration it should maintain the publisher-assigned ISBN.

If, however, a *Digital Book* (an EPUB, for example) enters the supply chain and is subsequently converted for rendering on various digital devices, has particular usage rights and/or restrictions applied—in any or all combinations—then a separate *Digital Book* has been created and a unique ISBN should be assigned.

Under the International ISBN Agency's guidelines, third-party vendors are allowed to assign ISBNs to *Digital Books* when/if the publisher chooses not to assign an ISBN. The third-party assigned ISBN can be from a pool of publisher-supplied ISBNs that are made available to the third-party, or from a pool of ISBNs the third-party has obtained on their own. In all cases it is up to the party assigning the ISBN to make sure that all pertinent metadata not affected by the third-party vendor's changes to the publisher's *Digital Book* are inherited from the original publisher ISBN, and that all metadata is updated and maintained through any and all subsequently assigned ISBNs.

If the third-party is using an ISBN from a publisher-supplied pool of numbers, it is incumbent on that third-party to communicate back to the publisher which ISBN is being assigned to which specific *Digital Book*.

Special Note on Metadata and Sales Tracking

It is the responsibility of any third-party assigning a unique ISBN to a *Digital Book* to maintain and update the original metadata supplied by the publisher to ensure that the most current metadata is always made available to the *Consumer*.

It is also the responsibility of any third-party assigning a unique ISBN to ensure that the link to the publisher-provided ISBN is maintained so that sales data and other information can be passed back to the publisher based on this original *Identifier*.

Best Practices

Separate ISBNs should be assigned to all unique *Digital Books* for ordering, listing, delivery and sales tracking purposes. In general, there are three major factors that determine the need to assign unique ISBNs to *Digital Books*.

1. Content
 - If two digital books are created, one an exact textual reproduction of a *Physical Book* and the other an enhanced version that includes video, audio, etc., then the two *Digital Books* are unique and different products, and each requires a unique ISBN.
2. Format
 - If an EPUB format, a PDF format and a Mobi format (among others) are created, each format should be assigned a unique ISBN. This is similar to creating a hardcover and paperback edition of a *Physical Book* and should follow the same rules regarding ISBN assignment.

(Note: When the application of DRM software is part of the transaction with the *Consumer* (as frequently happens in the US) it does not constitute the creation of a new format as the term is being used in this Policy Statement. In this case, DRM is not a format: it is a wrapper around a product. An EPUB file with DRM software applied is still an EPUB file, a PDF file with DRM applied is still a PDF file. In this case, DRM is not part of the product, it is part of the transaction. An ISBN is a product identifier, not a transaction identifier.)

3. Usage Rights

- If a *Digital Book* is made available with different usage rights in different markets (e.g. adjusting the usage settings so that printing is allowed in the version going to the education market, but not in the version going to the retail market), each version should be assigned a unique ISBN.

(Note: As described in the note under “Format” above, usage rights specifically applied to a publisher’s *Digital Book* using DRM software, such as Adobe Digital Editions or Apple FairPlay, as part of the transaction between the vendor and the *Consumer* does not fall into the above category and does not require the assignment of a unique ISBN.)

In the case of *Digital Books*, the publisher determines the entity that will assign the ISBN by following one of two paths:

Path One: If a publisher wants to track ordering, listing and sales at a granular level, it is expected that the publisher will assign a unique ISBN to each separate *Digital Book* that will eventually be made available to the *Consumer*, regardless of whether the publisher or a trading partner is creating the final *Digital Book(s)*.

Common examples of this can include, but are not limited to:

- EPUB
- Kindle
- Kobo
- Library Edition, PDF , EPUB
- Nook
- PDF
- iBook

Path Two: If a publisher wants to track ordering, listing, delivery and sales at a macro level, it is expected that the publisher will assign a unique ISBN only to each unique *Digital Book* that the publisher specifically makes available to the supply chain. The publisher must then rely on trading partners to appropriately assign and report additional unique ISBNs as needed, in conformance with this *Policy Statement*.

Common examples of this include, but are not limited to:

- EPUB
- Library-specific EPUB
- PDF

Examples

The following examples are intended to provide guidance on how to apply the assignment of ISBNs to *Digital Books* in real life situations based on specific use cases. As *Digital Books* are still evolving, BISG's Identification Committee anticipates a likely need to refine and supplement these examples over time, building up a practical guide on how *Digital Books* should be identified.

In the following examples, the assignment of a separate, unique *Identifier* is recommended. Please note: if a company decides to assign a proprietary identifier, as opposed to a unique ISBN, it is important that the proprietary identifier is not made public in the supply chain.

Example 1.1

The file format in which a particular *Digital Book* is available is changed.

In practice: A publisher assigns a unique ISBN to a non-device specific *Digital Book* in EPUB format. In addition to being made available to *Consumers* without further modification, the EPUB is provided to, and altered significantly by, a third-party in order to create a new file format that renders on a specific device or software program.

The third-party has created a separate, device-specific *Digital Book* different from the publisher's *Digital Book* (the EPUB); this newly created *Digital Book* should be assigned a unique ISBN (or proprietary identifier).

Example 1.2

A particular *Digital Book* is available on a retailer's website as a "rental", a "purchase" and a "rental-to-purchase upgrade".

In practice: A publisher grants a retailer permission to both sell and rent their *Digital Book*. Following either Path One or Path Two (previously described) it is up to the publisher to decide if they wish to provide separate ISBNs for the "purchase" and "rental" versions of the same *Digital Book*.

If the publisher supplies only one ISBN, the third party should apply this ISBN to the "purchase" version of the *Digital Book* and assign a unique ISBN (or proprietary identifier) to the "rental" version.

Under sales agreements where retailers are able to offer both a "purchase" and "rental" version of the *Digital Book*, they can also offer an option for a Customer to "upgrade" a rental to a "purchase"

version for the difference in price between the two versions. In this case, a unique ISBN (or proprietary identifier) should be assigned.

Example 1.3

A particular *Digital Book* is interoperable across multiple hardware devices. Other than the possible application of DRM software, such as Adobe Digital Editions, as part of the transaction to the *Consumer*, the *Digital Book* undergoes no other alteration to its content or file format. However the usage rights of the file will be changed according to the market it is sold in.

In practice: A publisher assigns a unique ISBN to a *Digital Book* in PDF format. The publisher sends the PDF to one or more third-party vendors that will make it available to the *Consumer*.

- In one market, usage rights to the publisher's PDF file are modified so that printing of any part of the content by the *Consumer* is forbidden.
- In another market, usage rights to the publisher's PDF file are modified so that printing of the content by the *Consumer* is restricted to a certain percentage or section of the *Digital Book*.

This manipulation of rights would significantly change the metadata describing the *Digital Book* to the *Consumer* and would therefore create two distinct products, each requiring a unique ISBN.

Example 1.4

A particular *Digital Book* is sold in an enhanced and a non-enhanced version.

In practice: From a publisher's non-enhanced *Digital Book*, the publisher or downstream trading partner produces an enhanced *Digital Book* that includes special features such as animation and audio. The price point is also changed. The two *Digital Books* are two different products at two different price points and require separate identification.

If the publisher wants to track sales separately, they should assign separate ISBNs (Path One as described above). If unique ISBNs are not provided by the publisher, the retailer should assign unique ISBNs and report sales, etc. back to the publisher on the single publisher-provided ISBN (Path Two).

In the following examples, separate, unique ISBNs should not be assigned by third-party intermediaries:

Example 2.1

A particular *Digital Book* is interoperable across multiple hardware devices. Other than the possible application of DRM software, such as Adobe Digital Editions, as part of the transaction to the *Consumer*, the *Digital Book* undergoes no other alteration to its content, usage rights or file format.

In practice: A publisher assigns a unique ISBN to a *Digital Book* in EPUB format. The publisher has not assigned ISBNs to any other file format that may be derived from the EPUB file (Path Two as described above). The publisher sends the EPUB to one or more third-party vendors. Each third-

party makes the EPUB available for sale to the consumer, using a particular DRM application, such as Adobe Digital Editions as part of the transaction to the consumer.

The application of particular DRM software as part of the transaction to the *Consumer* does not create or constitute a new *Digital Book* and therefore does not call for the assignment of a unique ISBN. The publisher assigned ISBN should be used.

Example 2.2

A *Digital Book* is made available by the publisher with different usage rights for different types of *Consumer* transactions, such as own versus lend.

In practice: A publisher assigns a unique ISBN to a *Digital Book* that is intended for sale, and releases it to a vendor who applies DRM software, such as Adobe Digital Editions or FairPlay, as part of the transaction with the *Consumer*. The vendor should continue to use the publisher assigned ISBN.

The publisher makes the same *Digital Book* available to a third-party digital fulfillment company serving the library market. The third-party applies DRM software, such as Adobe Digital Editions to allow the loan of the *Digital Book* as part of the transaction with the library patron. Even though the same *Digital Book* is now available for loan as opposed to purchase, the publisher assigned ISBN can continue to be used.

It should be noted that the publisher assigned ISBN for the edition being loaned by the library may be different than the publisher assigned ISBN of the edition being sold through a retailer, depending on the publishers internal processes. The point is that a third-party need not assign a unique ISBN to edition being lent.

Note: Since the usage settings are being applied as part of the transaction, the *Consumer* should be aware of what they are receiving as part of that transaction. The experience and expectations of a *Consumer* patronizing an online retailer to buy a *Digital Book* or visiting an online library to borrow a *Digital Book* are no different than a *Consumer* patronizing a physical bookstore or library.

Example 2.3

A publisher assigns unique ISBNs to all possible *Digital Books* that may be made available to *Consumers*.

In practice: A publisher creates an EPUB file. The publisher assigns an ISBN to the EPUB file as well as to all other *Digital Books* that could be derived and made available to *Consumers* (regardless of whether the publisher will create these *Digital Books* itself). The publisher transmits the EPUB – along with notice of which ISBNs should be linked to which *Digital Books* – to trading partners in the supply chain.

The various trading partners should always use the publisher-provided ISBNs. In this case, third parties should not assign their own unique ISBNs for use in their respective businesses.

Example 2.4

A particular *Digital Book* is sold to a *Consumer* with the publisher-selected option to lend.

In practice: A *Digital Book* is sold to a *Consumer* through one retail channel whose platform supports the publisher-selected option for lending the *Digital Book* to a different end user. The same *Digital Book* is sold through a separate retail channel whose platform does not support the publisher-selected option to lend.

The retailers do not need to assign unique ISBNs as long as usage rights are clearly apparent to the *Consumer* and the retailer controls the experience through its own platform. In other words, the retailer is not creating a new *Digital Book*, so no new ISBN should be assigned.

In this example, lending is not a transaction but rather a feature of a sales platform that not all retailers support.

APPENDIX A

List of companies that participated in BISG's Identification of E-Books Working Group

Apex CoVantage	Nielsen
Baker & Taylor	NISO
Book Industry Communication (BIC)	Oxford University Press
BookNet Canada	Pearson
Cambridge University Press	Penguin Group
Cengage Learning	Perseus Books Group
CrossRef	Quad/Graphics
Dial-A-Book	Random House
EDiTEUR	RoyaltyShare
Firebrand Technologies	RR Bowker
Hachette Book Group	RR Donnelley
HarperCollins Publishers	Simon & Schuster
Harvard University Press	Taylor & Francis
Houghton Mifflin	United Methodist Publishing House
Independent Publishers Group	University of California Press
Ingram Book Group	U.S. ISBN Agency
Ingram Content Group	Wolters Kluwer Health Medical Research
International ISBN Agency	Yale University Press
Kobo	YBP Library Services
Lightspeed LLC	
Macmillan	
McGraw-Hill	

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