



# **BIC Digital Audiobook Best Practice**

## **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

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This document is one of a set that Book Industry Communication has produced. Together, these provide a detailed standards and best practice overview of the digital audiobook supply chain.

BIC strongly recommends that you download and read the full set of documents. These currently comprise:

1. Supply Chain Diagram
2. Glossary, including
  - a. Terminology
  - b. Organisations
  - c. Roles and Responsibilities
3. Metadata Requirements
4. Good File Management
5. FAQs
6. EDItX Business Case
7. Sustainability Checklist
8. Accessibility Checklist

A single document including all of the above is also available.

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## A. Content Creation and Management

### 1. How should I engage studios and voice actors?

Look for studios with experience in audiobook production, who have specialist or purpose-built studios/ booths and are familiar with the specifications and requirements of an audiobook. You can dry hire a studio and provide your own actors/producers, but usually the studio will provide an engineer/ producer. Studios may also help with casting and engaging voice actors. You will see daily/ hourly rates, or per finished hour of audio rates. Agree upfront the level of preparation and quality assurance that will be done and establish delivery processes. Voice actors can also be engaged via their voice agents, for a per finished hour or daily rate. When engaging actors, you should give them as much information as possible about the book, including the accents needed, an overview of the text, etc.

### 2. What is a home studio?

Some actors have studios at home that they record in. They will typically provide raw files only that will then require the engagement of a studio or freelance producer for post-production (editing, proof listening, mastering), to finalise the files for distribution. It is advisable to request samples from the home studio or samples of completed productions to establish the quality of a home studio recording.

### 3. Do boilerplate agreements exist?

Each publisher will have its own agreement wording, but these might be standardised across projects.

### 4. What should I expect from the recording studio in terms of files?

Fully edited and mastered WAV files (and/ or other requested formats), to your specifications. Files may be proof listened for errors if agreed. Similarly, Chapter level metadata spreadsheets and samples will be provided if requested.

### 5. How do I create sample files?

Studios can provide these, or you can select sections (approx. 5-10 mins) using any audio editing software.

### 6. What role should accessibility play in content creation?

Audiobooks are inherently more accessible than printed books for some people. You should think about what information is included in the metadata to highlight the fact that the audiobook is accessible (reader, whether the book is abridged or not, navigation, file properties, manifest). Consider also other materials, such as accompanying PDFs, and whether that affects the overall accessibility of the product. Considering how you might support narrators/ authors with different requirements or needs through the audiobook process will also help to make the industry more accessible in general.

### 7. What is the recommended file format for master files?

WAV are lossless, durable, preserve the full quality of the recording and are therefore a good choice at the beginning of the audiobook supply chain. FLAC is sometimes used, but WAV is the most common.

### 8. What considerations should affect my choice of audiobook file format?

Considerations include whether the human ear can distinguish the highest quality uncompressed,

lossless audio from other lossless or lossy formats. With the growing awareness of and impact that sustainability has on the supply chain, that is an important question to answer. Uncompressed and lossless files will require greater bandwidth, potentially increasing transfer, storage and cloud processing costs. Also consider what the most robust audio format is for your business needs. Optimum audio quality as well as file durability for on-going supply and reproduction matter. Ultimately, your platforms', resellers' or vendors' submission requirements may override some of these choices.

## **9. What role does sustainability play?**

Parties in the supply chain should not store unnecessary data. This impacts bandwidth, transfer, storage and cloud processing, potentially driving up your business's carbon footprint and costs.

Sustainability means balancing the economic, societal and environmental needs of the planet, both now and in the future. There is a heightened awareness of how our behaviours as consumers, employees and private individuals can adversely impact the planet.

## **10. Why do some platforms' submission requirements stipulate a package of audio content of no more than x minutes duration?**

The main reasons for this stipulation are either that the platform has a technical or operational constraint, or that its downstream partners have a similar constraint. More information on submission requirements can be found in the Good File Management document.

## **11. What are sidecar files?**

These are bespoke files delivering information (usually metadata), which either can't be delivered in standard formats (e.g., ONIX) or the recipient can't extract the information from the standard format. A common example is chapter level metadata, which for best practice can be delivered in Block 3 of the ONIX message but is not yet widely accepted.

## **12. Who is responsible for the quality control of digital assets and metadata?**

The responsibility for the quality control of the audio files is split between the studio and the publisher. The publisher also has full responsibility for the quality of the metadata supplied.

## **13. What is meant by "good file management"?**

"Good file management" means having structured and searchable storage with version control and robust backups so that the correct files can be found and managed. All this should be provided by most digital asset management solutions.

## **14. What's the purpose of audiobooks?**

Audiobooks' purpose is to offer readers an alternative way of consuming books. There are many reasons why consumers may wish to listen to rather than read a book, including accessibility, the ability to multitask and the lack of time to focus solely on reading.

## **15. What goes into pdf supplements?**

The PDF supplement usually contains content that cannot be easily or effectively delivered in an audio format. For example, images, bibliography, family trees.

**16. What are submission requirements? Why do they matter?**

Submission requirements specify a digital distributor's, platform's, reseller's or retailer's expectations for accepting an audiobook for onward distribution, purchase, stream or loan.

It is important that trading partners do not make assumptions regarding submission requirements. These vary from trading partner to trading partner. Senders and recipients of digital audio assets and their metadata need to agree requirements, processes and timelines in advance. BIC's Good File Management document has more information on this subject.

**17. Do all audiobook trading partners offer publishers the option to provide bespoke samples and PDFs?**

This can vary between retailers. It is important to engage with each trading partner to find out what file formats they accept and what their platforms can provide to the end consumer.

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## B. Pre and Post Publication Metadata

### 1. What is ONIX?

ONline Information eXchange or ONIX, is the international and most widely used standard for capturing and communicating book product information. This includes both physical and digital audiobook metadata. More information is available at: [www.editeur.org](http://www.editeur.org)

### 2. Why aren't industry standards for ONIX more prescriptive?

Like all standards, ONIX is a set of guidelines. These need to reflect the diverse business needs and capabilities of the organisations in the book industry that rely on ONIX as a mechanism for communicating product metadata. A degree of flexibility allows for the sender and recipient of the ONIX file to reflect the specific requirements of their particular trading relationship.

### 3. Why doesn't everyone use ONIX?

ONIX requires a level of technical skill. There may also be financial and operational constraints that render the adoption of ONIX impractical. ONIX is the standard for communicating rich product information to partners with potentially complex requirements for managing that data. For some organisations, the product data being exchanged is limited in scope, as are the uses to which it is put. ONIX is simply not warranted. Key players in the book industry such as data aggregators and wholesalers offer non-ONIX based alternatives for communicating product metadata, such as preformatted Excel worksheets.

### 4. ONIX 3.0 has been replaced by 3.1, but why are some organisations still using 2.1?

Version 3.0 represented a major update to ONIX when released in 2009. Version 2.1 was released in 2003. Support for version 2.1 ended in 2014 but technical, operational or financial constraints may influence organisations' speed of transition to 3.0 or 3.1. New ONIX implementations should adopt and implement the latest version of ONIX.

Users who don't have ONIX capabilities should still adopt the latest version of the ONIX controlled vocabulary when exchanging product metadata in non-ONIX formats.

### 5. Why don't ONIX users comply with the standard? This causes issues.

ONIX allows for a degree of flexibility to reflect the needs of both the sender and receiver of metadata in the trading relationship. It is not usually the standard that is at fault, but how the standard has been implemented or even the quality and completeness of the information populating the various data elements.

### 6. The quality of specific pieces of metadata can be poor. What data validation takes place?

It is up to the sender and recipient of the data to agree what validation takes place and when. This may be done independently or be a collaborative effort. Dependent on the complexity and the richness of the data, it may be impractical to validate every data element. Consider which are the most critical data elements. Are there tolerances, thresholds or exception reports that can help with quality control? Remember that the originator of the data is ultimately responsible for quality, timeliness and completeness. Adherence to the XML Schema (XSD) will also help avoid issues.

## 7. Why are my trading partners not using ONIX block 8 updates?

A block update is an update to an ONIX metadata record. An ONIX product record contains 8 or 9 blocks, and each block can be updated independently of the others.

Block 8 carries information about the manufacture and production of audiobooks. It includes a manifest of the files required to assemble the product. Together with Block 3, (for rich, chapter level metadata), it can indicate the relationship between files or CDs and chapters.

Block 8 is not yet widely adopted. Where the sender or recipient of metadata wants to implement block 8 updates, it is important that both parties agree to its implementation.

## 8. How can I minimise errors in my ONIX files?

The XML Schema Definition (XSD) or Strict XSD can be used to validate an ONIX file.

## 9. What are the common ONIX errors that I should look out for?

- a. Leaving ONIX fields blank
- b. Data elements in the wrong order
- c. Duplication of sequence numbers
- d. Conditional data elements that become mandatory for some implementations

## 10. Should I always send metadata and the associated audio assets together?

Ideally the core metadata (including ISBN, Author, Title, Publisher, Price and Publication Date) should be sent at least 16 weeks ahead of publication date. Audio specific data elements that require production of the audio asset, such as chapter level metadata and file manifests, should be sent with the asset to ensure complete and successful receipt and validation. This should happen at least three weeks before publication.

## 11. What happens if the metadata arrives after the audio asset?

If the metadata arrives after the asset, it is very likely that the recipient (intermediary or retailer) will not know what the asset is or what to do with it.

## 12. Is it possible to send the core metadata too early?

Yes. Some intermediaries, platforms and retailers will have parameters specifying that metadata will only be processed x days, weeks or months ahead of publication date. Check with your trading partner. The earlier the core metadata is circulated, the greater the chance of discovery and pre-orders. Conversely, there is a greater risk of changes to the information requiring updates.

## 13. Does it matter if the product is abridged?

ONIX allows for the metadata to stipulate whether the digital audiobook is abridged or not. Some vendors, resellers or retailers may not handle abridged versions. That is a business decision.

## 14. What are the minimum metadata requirements for a digital audiobook product?

This may vary dependent on the specific trading relationship. However, the more complete, accurate and timely the data is, the greater the chance of discovery of the product and potential sales, streams, downloads or loans. Product information is important for the pre-order of titles in advance of publication. BIC Basic is a good reference point for the absolute minimum of information required for a

viable product record. More information about this can be found on the BIC website and in the Audiobook Metadata Requirements document.

### **15. The publisher's metadata is wrong. What should I do?**

Responsibility for the completeness, timeliness and accuracy of metadata resides with the publisher (or product owner or originator). Details need to be fed back for correction and update. On receipt of updated files, metadata recipients should apply the updates in a timely way to correct issues.

### **16. Why are the metadata timeline requirements for digital audiobooks different to those for physical books and digital books?**

For most metadata elements (such as Title, Author, ISBN), the timeline should be no different to that of a physical book. However, metadata like reader's name and final duration may not be available until close to publication date.

### **17. What specific audiobook data elements should I pay particular attention to?**

- a. Chapter level metadata
- b. Runtime (duration)
- c. Reader details
- d. File format

### **18. What is the relevance of price & availability (P&A) to digital audiobooks?**

It doesn't matter whether a product is available in a physical or digital format (or both). P&A defines the status and price of an audiobook at a specific distributor or reseller. Availability information should be updated as the underlying status changes.

### **19. Does the P&A status of a physical book influence the status of its digital audiobook counterpart?**

No, the availability of different formats is usually independent, unless publication rights revert.

### **20. How will publishers' management of digital audiobooks affect their overall BIC accreditation (Metadata Excellence Award)?**

Whilst not directly affecting accreditation currently, BIC is monitoring the timeliness and completeness of digital audiobook products.

Information on the application process is available on the Accreditations page of the BIC website.

For details about how to create a viable digital audiobook record, please refer to BIC's Digital Audiobook Metadata Requirements document in the Resources Centre on the BIC website.

### **21. Do ONIX and W3C complement each other?**

There is an overlap in what ONIX and W3C do. That said, ONIX is specifically designed for book industry use. The W3C audiobook package is designed primarily for delivery to the end consumer (sometimes called the 'Lightweight Packaging Format' or LPF). It is a zip archive containing the audio (and any other) files and two predefined metadata documents: a manifest listing the files in the package and a table of contents specifying (at a minimum) the listening order. This is a *delivery* format, not one used at earlier stages of the supply chain. It does not overlap significantly with ONIX Block 8.



**22. Is simultaneous publication of the digital audiobook alongside other formats standard practice these days?**

This is often, but not always, the case. There are also audiobooks without a physical version.

**23. How can I identify problems with digital audiobook assets and/ or metadata?**

Learn what recipients need by way of submission requirements and proactively check the individual data elements against these criteria.

**24. What's the specification for a cover image?**

This varies from retailer to retailer, but generally images must be square and at least 2,400 pixels wide/ high. Some trading partners may insist on a minimum specification of 3,000 pixels wide/ high.

**25. What is file metadata?**

File metadata is product information embedded in digital asset files. Users must remember that whilst this product information may be minimal, it will still require regular update and validation to ensure that any changes to the full product record are accurately reflected in the embedded data. This will avoid potential conflicts should there be more than one source of product information.

**26. Is a cover image a digital asset or metadata?**

There's no clearcut answer to this. However, as a guideline, an image file (jpeg) should be considered a digital asset, while a link to an image should be considered metadata.

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## C. Content Delivery and Consumer Experience

### 1. My storage and distribution costs for digital files are increasing. What can I do?

A sustainable supply chain is as important as one based on recognised industry standards and best practice. Businesses should consider how their decision making impacts the environment and costs.

The nature of the digital audiobook supply chain means that some audio specific data elements may not be finalised until very near publication date when the digital asset becomes available. Consider the practicalities of only updating the data elements that have changed, as well as the audio file formats used. Are these formats 'lossy' or 'lossless'? Does this noticeably affect audio quality? What file format is required to meet the needs of your supply chain partners and the end consumer?

There may be implications for bandwidth, transfer and cloud processing costs.

### 2. Why do some organisations send file manifests via email?

Best practice for the management of digital audiobook assets and metadata is to package the assets and metadata together wherever practical. This helps ensure that at the point of ingestion, the recipient of the assets can confirm whether the product is complete.

In practice, most deliveries are not packaged and therefore the email manifest is a simple way to let the recipient know what to expect.

### 3. Does one digital audio file always equate to one book chapter?

No, one file can contain more than one chapter and vice versa. However, best practice is to equate one file to one chapter.

### 4. How can I determine how the real chapter name relates to an audio file?

Usually, this connection is made by a sidecar spreadsheet but can be supplied via Block 3 (chapter level metadata) and Block 8 (production manifest) in ONIX.

### 5. How can I avoid manifest mismatches?

Ensure that the manifest is generated by the entity that supplies the files.

### 6. Should I be sending compressed or uncompressed audio files to my trading partners?

Uncompressed audio files risk increasing bandwidth, transfer and cloud processing costs. The publisher should supply the quality of files that the trading partner requires for their business, bearing in mind the costs associated with this.

### 7. How should I manage updates to audio content (such as marketing materials or file counts)?

Because the products are generally not packaged, changes to their composition carries the risk that the recipient might not get the correct, updated version of the products.

Pre and post publication, deliver all files. These should be zipped in a package to avoid the situation described above.

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For example, if a marketing-content file is added at the start of the audiobook, it will be the (new) file 001, and all subsequent files will need re-naming to ensure the complete and correct file sequence.

Deliver new chapter metadata if the file count (or, less likely, the chapter sequence) changes.

### **8. Does the product information relating to a specific digital audiobook asset come with version control?**

No, although updates to product information may have unique IDs or be date and/ or time stamped. Always process metadata updates as soon as they are received. Do not apply updates out of sequence. Do not discard updates.

### **9. I'm a publisher. What should I do if a specific platform, reseller or retailer won't apply an update to a digital audiobook file or the associated metadata?**

Timely updates are critical, and this requirement should be included in the contractual obligations as part of a service level agreement (SLA).

### **10. What is digital piracy?**

This is the illegal copying and distribution of copyrighted files.

### **12. How can I protect digital audio files?**

Digital watermarking is one option. This is a piece of code (a marker) embedded in the audio asset providing copyright and ownership information.

### **13. What is digital rights management?**

Also known as DRM, it usually refers to technical protection measures such as encryption or watermarking of digital content. This is used to enforce or monitor compliance with the licence to use an audiobook. DRM can for example prevent or limit copying and redistribution of the digital content, sharing and lending, and can also place a time limit on the use of the content to enable rentals. DRM is intended to protect intellectual property from copyright infringement.

### **14. How can Zip files help me deliver content?**

Zip files can be used to package digital assets, metadata and supplementary materials together for delivery to intermediaries such as digital distributors and platforms.

However, the use of zip files needs to be agreed in advance between the sending and receiving parties. There may be technical constraints that dictate the maximum number of bytes per zip file, or that preclude certain file types from being unzipped (such as JPEG images). Some recipients prefer unzipped (unpacked) files, although additional checks may be required to ensure that all files are sent and received.