

BIC Bites

BIC Bites are a series of short, high level, papers on topics of interest to BIC Members. If there is a topic you would like to see as a BIC Bite, please contact info@bic.org.uk

Introduction to *Thema* for booksellers

Thema is a global subject categorisation scheme for use in the book trade. It can be used to categorise and arrange books and related products by their subject, regardless of their digital or physical format, right across the supply chain, including in bookshops. The main aim of the scheme is to ensure that booksellers, buyers and readers can use the categories to discover the books they want. It's also intended to power sales analysis and industry-wide statistics.

The scheme is designed by and for publishers and booksellers, and it's built on the expertise and knowledge acquired from previous national subject category schemes¹. Unlike those older schemes, *Thema* is designed to be used both globally and locally. It's managed by EDItEUR and updated roughly every two years, with all updates validated by an International Steering Committee to ensure the changes benefit all stakeholders.

Why is *Thema* so important to booksellers?

Subject category schemes such as *Thema* are one of the most important ways publishers can inform booksellers, librarians, educators and readers what a particular title is *about*, which 'shelf' – physical or virtual – you would find it on, whether it's the book a reader needs or could be interested in.

The use of clear, structured subject categorisation is a valuable tool for booksellers, to drive improved merchandising and boost discoverability. Better discoverability has a direct commercial benefit through improving sales. Of course, it's not the only metadata element used in search and discovery of titles – keywords, author, title, collection, format and age range are all vital too – but subject categories remain one of the main pathways to finding titles for both booksellers and readers. As well as its use in search and discovery, *Thema* is directly relevant to purchasing decisions for stock items and specific customer orders, for helping with shelving, and for collecting statistical information linked to sales. A subject scheme like *Thema* doesn't take away from the skill a bookseller needs for selecting and selling books to their customer, finding alternative titles or making recommendations, but it's an essential tool that helps make the most of those skills.

Although it's relatively new², *Thema* is already common throughout the supply chain, starting with publishers who add *Thema* to the metadata about a title, based on their knowledge of the content. Publishers store this information in their own internal databases and send *Thema* 'subject codes' with the rest of the metadata about their publications to their trading partners. They may make subject category headings visible on their websites, and they may add them to catalogues or other advance information about new titles.

Distributors, wholesalers, sales agencies or centrally-aggregated Books in Print databases also hold *Thema* categories and make them available to trade customers via their online customer interface, or they may supply the categories in the metadata sent to bookshops' internal systems and consumer-facing websites. *Thema* subject categories can be used to create 'suggested order' lists or catalogues with books from multiple publishers and aimed at all retailers – such as all the titles that are about Christmas (*Thema* code 5HPD). This could extend to lists created in response to a specific bookseller request – "we have a school looking for titles aimed at 8 year-olds about different countries in Africa, so what do you stock?" (*Thema* codes 1H* plus 5AJ).

¹ There are many of these older national schemes, some still in use in parallel with *Thema*. The BISAC scheme remains important in the USA and Canada, and CLIL in France. Others such as the UK's former BIC subject scheme or Germany's WGS are rapidly being superseded by *Thema* – the BIC scheme was declared 'obsolete' in February 2024, and any organisation with a reliance on BIC subjects should transition quickly to use of *Thema*.

² It was first introduced in 2013, though *Thema* is in fact very similar in structure to the much older BIC subject scheme – so for many in the UK, *Thema* is simply 'the new BIC'.

The categories can also be stored and displayed within a retailer's internal stock systems, to enable shelving decisions, in-stock searches, customer enquiry and collection of sales statistics to inform future purchasing. A bookseller's website may also use *Thema* to arrange titles by subject or to enable detailed, flexible search.

Structure of the *Thema* subject category scheme

Thema is made up of 20 broad subject sections. Each of these 20 sections is at the top of a hierarchy of increasingly detailed subject categories, several levels deep. Each category in the hierarchy has a text heading and a unique alphanumeric code, and in general, more specific or precise categories have longer codes.

In addition to the subjects, there are six 'qualifier' sections. Qualifiers are used alongside the subject categories, to add greater meaning or nuance to a particular category. So, a Fiction category (a code starting with F*) used together with a Place qualifier (a code starting with 1*) would indicate that the novel's theme or setting was that place. A *Thema* category from the History section (a code starting with N*) would be used with Place and Time period qualifiers (codes starting with 3*) to indicate that it was a history of that place during that period.

Within the six sections, there are two types of qualifier: 'core' qualifiers and 'national extensions'. The latter are qualifiers added to reflect the needs of a particular market, but which may not necessarily be of use outside that market. This – and the fact that the headings are available in numerous languages – is how *Thema* can be suitable for both global and local use. For example, within the Educational purpose qualifiers, there are sets of codes for specific national curricula – 4Z-GB- for the curricula of the nations of the UK, and within the Place qualifiers there are codes for specific regions or cities and towns within a country – they start at 1DDU for the UK and 1DDR for Ireland. Outside their intended country, national extensions are still valid, but they can be partially ignored if the level of detail isn't required.

Have a look at the multilingual online *Thema* browser at <https://ns.editeur.org/thema> to see the structure and explore the topics you're particularly interested in, or download the complete set of *Thema* categories in HTML, Excel or other formats from <https://www.editeur.org/151/thema>. Like EDItEUR's other standards ONIX and EDItX, the *Thema* subject scheme is free of charge to use.

How can I use *Thema*?

When a publisher or aggregator uses *Thema*, it's always the code that will be sent in any metadata and used to assign a title to the equivalent section of the bookshop. Of course, it's unlikely the bookshop is arranged exactly according to the *Thema* hierarchy: any retailer can map *Thema* codes – or combinations of codes – to their own subject headings or shelving labels. For a physical shop or public-facing website, a bookseller will most likely use wording or terms that match their own customers' or staff's familiar terminology.

Thema is a 'post-coordinated' subject scheme. Instead of having a single code for every possible concept, new meaning can be created by combining more than one category. And because of this, most books carry several codes – a combination of subjects and qualifiers. When a publisher categorises a title or a reader begins a search by subject, they can start by using just one single category, for example Modern and Contemporary Fiction (FBA) – but this would be a *huge* selection of books, so they can *refine* FBA by adding other categories and qualifiers where they are relevant. For example, after a search for books assigned the FBA code, you could then narrow the results to those that dealt with racism (JBFA1) that were set in the USA (1KBB) in the 21st Century (3MR). This kind of 'faceted search' allows you to search, filter and create detailed lists of titles of interest.

Further Information

Further information is available on our website at <https://bic.org.uk>, and there's lots more about *Thema* on the EDItEUR website – all the key resources are available from <https://www.editeur.org/151/thema>. BIC members can raise questions about *Thema* with the BIC Metadata Committee, or via the thema@groups.io mailing list (subscribe by sending an e-mail to thema+subscribe@groups.io). BIC also runs a range of metadata training, including courses on *Thema*.

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