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Assigning a new ISBN vs keeping the original ISBN

When a new product is published, publishing companies routinely assign a new ISBN – the key product identifier for the industry. But when *revising and releasing a new version of an existing product* – in the broadest sense – there is sometimes uncertainty about whether the revisions merit or require a new identifier. The *ISBN User Manual* makes many of the requirements clear, in line with the principle that **if anyone in the supply chain needs to distinguish between old and new, then a new ISBN should be assigned**. This need for distinction between old and new versions covers the business requirements of distributors and wholesalers, libraries and retailers, not just of the publisher itself.

When is a new ISBN required?

The *ISBN User Manual*¹ lists the circumstances in which a new ISBN is required. These include:

- when a book is retitled (the novel *Q&A* by Vikas Swarup was republished with a new ISBN and under the title *Slumdog Millionaire*, after release of the movie adaptation)
- when the editorial content of the book is *significantly* changed. Clearly, trivial revisions such as correction of minor typos does not count as 'significant', whereas a full revision of the content requires a new ISBN – as well as an updated <EditionNumber> or <EditionType>. Addition of a new chapter merits a new ISBN (and possibly an ENL Edition type. In some circumstances, even a single changed word or number can be significant – correction of a dosage in a medical textbook, for example
- when the book's physical or *digital* format is changed. 'Format' here encompasses the binding type, physical size or the digital file format: in ONIX, this is likely to be expressed in <ProductForm>, <ProductFormDetail>, <ProductFormFeature> and <Measure>. Hardback, A-format paperback, B-format paperback, digital audiobook, EPUB and PDF would all need unique ISBNs. A minor modification in physical size (no more than a few mm) or paper type such as might be required when switching to POD manufacture, or other changes that mean the old and new versions remain interchangeable and that do not risk customer confusion or complaint do *not* merit a new ISBN
- a new ISBN is required when a book is packaged with another component, for example a book packaged with a toy. The combined pack's ISBN must be different from that of the book alone
- when a book's imprint or publisher changes – though if ownership is transferred from one publisher to another, existing inventory need not be given a new ISBN immediately. New stock with the new publisher branding requires a new ISBN
- when there are *significant* changes in the usage rights or constraints of a licensed product (including e-books and digital audio). This might include differentiation between a perpetual and a time-limited licence (a 'purchase' from a 'rental') or a change in constraints on library loans (eg unlimited loans to limited loans)
- re-publishing a book that is out of print. 'Revival' from OP status requires a new ISBN and a new publication date, even if the product itself is essentially identical to the earlier OP product (see BIC's *OP Best Practice documentation*²).

Further discussion of some ISBN requirements is available in the BIC Bite *Introduction to the ISBN*³.

Beyond these requirements, using new ISBNs for *entirely or essentially unchanged products* is sometimes decried as 'old wine in new bottles'. A new ISBN does clearly give publishers a second chance – a new marketing campaign, new publicity, new 'clean' metadata and a new 'identity' might generate improved visibility and perhaps new orders – but it can also be viewed as artificial, even unprincipled, and can cause significant market confusion, particularly for libraries. New marketing collateral and updated metadata do *not* in themselves

¹ <https://www.isbn-international.org/content/isbn-users-manual/29>

² <https://bic.org.uk/resources/out-of-print-best-practice/>

³ https://bic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/13.-BIC-Bites-International-Standard-Book-Number_FINAL.pdf

justify a new ISBN – they can and should be handled as metadata updates for the original ISBN.

When is a new ISBN not required – but might still be advisable?

There are many real-world circumstances in which a new ISBN is not strictly *required*, but where a new identifier might be *advisable* for practical purposes, in order to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty in the supply chain. In each case, the publisher should consider the practical benefits, as well as the issues that might arise in their own business and in the business processes of other parties in the full supply chain.

- A new ISBN is *not* required when the cover design of a book is changed – assuming of course that the title, content, format etc remain unchanged. So a movie tie-in or other alternative cover that *replaces* an earlier cover can continue to use the existing ISBN. However, two covers may sometimes *co-exist* in the market, and in this case separate ISBNs allow retailers, librarians and readers to distinguish between them and order the one they want. For example, the paperback of Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Dr Norell* was simultaneously available in black and white cover variants with distinct ISBNs for ease of ordering, stock control, sales monitoring *etc*
- a change of adjunct content – changes to advertising content such as backads or adding a preview of another book – do *not* merit a new ISBN. However, addition of an introduction or foreword, or a new appendix, might affect a reader's or librarian's view of the work, and this could justify a new ISBN
- a change in manufacturing method or specification – such as a change of paper grade, switching from litho printing to POD, or the removal of cover embossing or foil – does *not* in itself merit a new ISBN, as the new version remains equivalent and reasonably interchangeable with the old. However, if a manufacturing change is accompanied by other modifications such as a change in physical size (by more than a few millimetres), or in business terms and conditions, there may be a benefit in assigning a new ISBN. For example, a change to POD manufacturing may merit a new ISBN when accompanied by a change in business terms and conditions (POD copies may not be returnable)
- 'special sales' versions such as retailer-exclusives are generally given new ISBNs even if otherwise identical to normal trade stock. They may not be returnable, for example, or may be exclusive to a particular retailer, which means distributors require a means to differentiate between standard and special versions
 - special attention will need to be given to these new ISBNs in services such as Nielsen BookScan, where sales of the normal and special ISBNs can be aggregated upon publisher request
- a technical update or change in details of the file format for a digital publication may merit a new ISBN. Updating from EPUB 2.1 to EPUB 3.2 will most likely affect whether or not the e-book can be read on certain devices – older devices may not support the new format. In such cases, a change of ISBN (and possibly other metadata) would highlight this difference. However, a small update or bugfix to any Javascript embedded within the e-book that is very unlikely to affect compatibility adversely would *not* merit a new ISBN (although the EPUB itself will contain a separate internal identifier and timestamp that can be used to distinguish the two versions).

What should be taken into account when considering a new ISBN?

Of course, any new ISBN must have practical benefits in the supply chain, in order to defray the small monetary cost of the ISBN itself, but there may be significant practical costs or complications too. The new ISBN will for most purposes be a 'new' product, with a new ONIX record, a new <RecordReference>, a new publication date and a new sales history, even if most other metadata remains unchanged. If the new ISBN needs to be viewed as 'a variant of the old product' for certain purposes, then:

- the publisher's internal data systems may need to be modified to ensure that new and old versions are linked for budgeting and sales analysis, while remaining distinct for other business processes
- in general, retailers and librarians strongly *dislike unnecessary* new ISBNs – librarians and other purchasers must be made aware of the relationship between old and new. In ONIX, <RelatedWork> can be used to make it clear the old and new versions have the same content (just as it can also link HB, PB, audio and so on) as all versions are manifestations of the same work and thus carry the same work identifier. And <RelatedProduct> can express the relationships between versions. In particular, linking the new ISBN back to the old version using a 'Replaces' relationship is vital. It's important to update metadata for the *old* ISBN too – <RelatedProduct> relation codes often come in reciprocal pairs, one pointing in each 'direction' (eg Replaces is matched by Replaced by), so adding a Replaced by to the old ISBN is also useful. The <PublishingStatus> and <ProductAvailability> of the old ISBN may also need to be updated. Ideally, the

reason for the new ISBN should be clear in the metadata, even if only in a descriptive text field

- without this clarity in the metadata, new ISBNs may never regain the place on retailers' core stock lists previously held by the old ISBN, old reviews may never be linked to the new product, or the old cover may be linked to the new ISBN (negating some benefits of using a new ISBN). The potential for confusion of two seemingly identical products is obvious, and as the older ISBN should in many cases be declared out-of-print, some potential sales may be lost.

Publishers (and other parties in the supply chain) should always consider the requirements and experience of the end customer, as well as that of all supply chain partners. If through lack of a new ISBN, the end customer receives the wrong product, or no product at all, then the customer service costs of even a single return and replacement may outweigh the cost of a new ISBN. But new ISBNs should not be assigned unless there is a real need, either because of the explicit rules of ISBN assignment or the practicalities of the supply chain.

Further Information

BIC members can raise questions about ISBNs with the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee, and more information is available on our website at <https://bic.org.uk>.

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