

# Principles of the ISNI system

There are a number of differences between a library authority file and the ISNI database.

## Different goals

The ISNI database is not an authority file. Its sole goal is the creation of unique identifiers for public identities (the names by which persons and corporate bodies are publicly known) that are involved anywhere in the life cycle of intellectual and artistic content. (See [ISNI FAQ](#)) Therefore, many of the use cases that govern our library authority records (e.g., establishing consistent access points for use in bibliographic descriptions) do not apply.

## Scope

The International Standard Name Identifier (ISNI) is a standard that uniquely identifies public identities involved throughout the chain of creation, production, management and distribution of intellectual or artistic contents. It identifies the public identities of parties such as authors, composers, cartographers, performers, academic and scientific authors, researchers, or publishers. ([ISNI FAQ](#))

The database includes persons as well as fictional and legendary characters and non-human personages when they feature in creative content.

Organizations (corporate bodies) are in scope for ISNI, but meeting names (conferences) are not. Even though ISNI records may be found for some meeting names, new records for meetings should not be created pending discussions between ISNI and OCLC.

## Is there a preferred form of name?

As opposed to traditional library authority work, ISNI does not require participants to follow a single standard. The group of contributors is very diverse and includes many non-library sources. Creating an ISNI is solely focused on identification. There is no "official" form of name. Names do not need to be unique and are not based on usage. However, it is recommended to use a full form of the name (e.g., forename instead of just an initial, but of course, persons known by their initials, such as T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, should be recorded with and without initials). A new ISNI record will be matched by an algorithm against the existing database to avoid duplicates, and a fuller form of name is helpful in this process.

All variants of a name that identify a public identity are recorded in the same record. While within the system each ISNI contributor codes one name in the "name" (field 700) and all others as "variant names" (field 400), no "preferred" name is indicated in the public view. All names are shown there in alphabetical order.

## How much information should be included?

The goal of an ISNI is NOT to "catalog" the person as can be done in current MARC authorities using the MARC 3XX elements, but to uniquely identify a public identity. ISNI therefore only contains the minimal amount of information needed to identify an entity and distinguish it from others (such as dates, titles, related entities, and external links), particularly for common names. An ISNI record does not aim to provide comprehensive information about an entity, but it can include links to web pages and other sources that contain such information.

## No earlier/later names for corporate bodies!

ISNI does not treat a new name for a corporate body as a new entity. Different names for linear name changes are all considered variants. A new ISNI is created only when a change to the structure of the organization occurred, such as a merger or split – essentially causing it to become a different organization.

## Can there be only one ISNI for each person?

ISNIs describe public identities, but pseudonyms are considered separate public identities. Each public identity relating to a given party shall have separate ISNI. ([ISNI FAQ](#)) Records for multiple public identities of the same person are linked, but the links may be suppressed on request.