

Thema for booksellers

1. What is Thema?

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 schemes ¹. Unlike those older schemes, *Thema* is designed to be used both globally and locally. It's managed by EDITEUR and revised and updated roughly every two years, with all updates validated by an International Steering Committee to ensure the changes benefit all the stakeholders.

Did you know that *Thema* has active users on every continent except Antarctica? However, it does have a place qualifier code for Antarctica (1MTS) if you do need to find all the titles written about or set there.

2. Why is Thema so important for 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' 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, format, age range, collection 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: it's an essential tool that helps make the most of those skills.

Did you know *Thema* has qualifiers that allow you to identify titles where the content has major themes or storylines relating to, or of major interest to or specifically about different groups of people? Have a look at the qualifiers starting with 5P*.

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 BIC subject scheme or Germany's WGS are rapidly being superseded by *Thema*

3. As a small independent bookseller, how does Thema help me?

As a specialist retailer serving your community, you know the kind of titles your customers read, and you want to ensure you stock a choice of titles reflecting the diverse interests of your regulars. *Thema* categories and qualifiers allow you to search for and select the most relevant forthcoming or backlist titles. Subject-based selection may surface titles you might suggest or order for specific clients or for local events and community groups.

You can use subject categories and qualifiers to select the subjects most important for your shop and your customers. In combination, or separately, *Thema* subject categories allow you to select books of local interest, or of interest to a particular segment of the community, or which tackle a particular topic. Have a look at the Place qualifiers (qualifiers starting with 1*) that cover your area or the communities that may live in your area. Have a look for the books about languages spoken in your area that may be of interest to your customers (qualifiers starting with 2*). What is taught in your local schools? Have a look at the *Thema* educational purpose qualifiers (qualifiers starting with 4*). What is topical in your area at the moment? Have a look for the relevant subject categories and see what titles are associated with these codes. *Thema* is an important tool that complements your bookselling skills and helps with discovering and selling more relevant titles.

Did you know that publishers often include information about contributors in their ONIX files, including which country, region or even city they live in, so that you can look for local authors as well?

4. What does Thema look like?

Thema is made up of 20 broad subject categories as shown in the image below. 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.²

² The online *Thema* browser can be found here: <https://ns.editeur.org/thema/>

A	The Arts...
C	Language and Linguistics...
D	Biography, Literature and Literary studies...
F	Fiction and Related items...
G	Reference, Information and Interdisciplinary subjects...
J	Society and Social Sciences...
K	Economics, Finance, Business and Management...
L	Law...
M	Medicine and Nursing...
N	History and Archaeology...
P	Mathematics and Science...
Q	Philosophy and Religion...
R	Earth Sciences, Geography, Environment, Planning...
S	Sports and Active outdoor recreation...
T	Technology, Engineering, Agriculture, Industrial processes...
U	Computing and Information Technology...
V	Health, Relationships and Personal development...
W	Lifestyle, Hobbies and Leisure...
X	Graphic novels, Comic books, Cartoons...
Y	Children's, Teenage and Educational...

Along with the subjects there are six 'qualifier' sections. These 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 a Place qualifier and Time period qualifier (codes starting with 3*) to indicate that it was a history of that place during that period.

1	Place qualifiers...
2	Language qualifiers...
3	Time period qualifiers...
4	Educational purpose qualifiers...
5	Interest qualifiers...
6	Style qualifiers...

Within the six sections, there are two types of qualifier: 'core' qualifiers and 'national extensions'. These national extensions 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, for example, 4Z-GB- for the curricula of the nations of the UK, and within the Place qualifiers there are codes for specific regions, cities and towns within a country, for example 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.

Notation	Category heading
1	Place qualifiers...
1D	Europe...
1DD	Western Europe...
1DDU	United Kingdom, Great Britain...
1DDU-GB-E	England...
1DDU-GB-EW	South West England...
1DDU-GB-EWT	Dorset...
1DDU-GB-EWTB	Bournemouth and Poole

The hierarchical structure of the codes used with national extensions allows anyone who receives a code but does not want to display that degree of detail to truncate the code and use less detailed but still useful core qualifier. Above, for example, is the national extension for Dorset – code 1DDU-GB-EWT. This might be too much detail for a non-UK bookseller with only a small selection of travel titles, so the retailer could use one of the ‘parent’ codes that share part of the code for Dorset. They could use England (code 1DDU-GB-E), or the United Kingdom (code 1DDU).

A single *Thema* category is made up of three parts. First, there is an alphanumeric code which remains constant and is the element that is used in the exchange of metadata about a title. Then there’s a heading that defines the meaning of this code. By and large, these headings are created in English, but they’ve been translated into more than 20 languages. The headings that you see in the official documentation are definitive, but the codes may be mapped to a retailer’s own choice of words so long as the meaning is always the same. Finally, many of the codes and headings are accompanied by notes to provide further clarity in the definition, cross-references or hints to help publishers assigning *Thema* categories to their books or booksellers using *Thema* to arrange their shop. The illustration below shows notes attached to categories JB and JBFA1.

Notation	Category heading	?
J	Society and Social Sciences...	*
JB	Society and culture: general... Use all JB* codes for: both general and academic works on social topics. Use with: JH* codes for sociology textbooks and other specialist works as appropriate. See also: VFV* Relationships and families: advice and issues... and its subcategories	*
JBF	Social and ethical issues...	*
JBFA	Social discrimination and equal treatment...	*
JBFA1	Racism and racial discrimination Class here: institutional racism, xenophobia. Use for: works about discrimination and prejudice based on skin colour, race or ethnic origin, or prejudices based on the perception that someone is foreign or from outside the community, and issues of inequality and discrimination, as well as measures to address racism	*

Did you know that *Thema* allows publishers to mix fiction and non-fiction codes, so you can find not only the books about a subject, but also the novels that feature this topic as a major *Theme*? This applies to books for adults, teenagers or children.

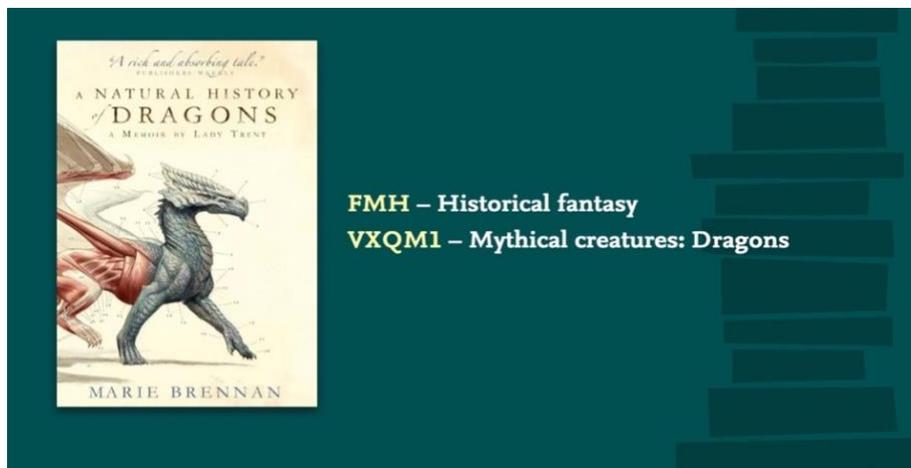
5. How does Thema work in practice?

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 words that match their own customers' or staff's familiar terminology.

Thema is a 'post-coordinated' subject scheme. This means that instead of having a single code for every possible concept, 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 for a subject, they can start by using just one single category, for example Modern and Contemporary Fiction (FBA) – but this would be a huge list, so you can refine this 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 down 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 that may interest you.

Did you know that *Thema* has special fiction categories to identify the major theme of novels? Have a look at the codes starting with FX. These are especially useful when looking at lists of contemporary fiction. For example, FXN - Narrative theme: identity / belonging or FXS – Narrative themes: Social issues

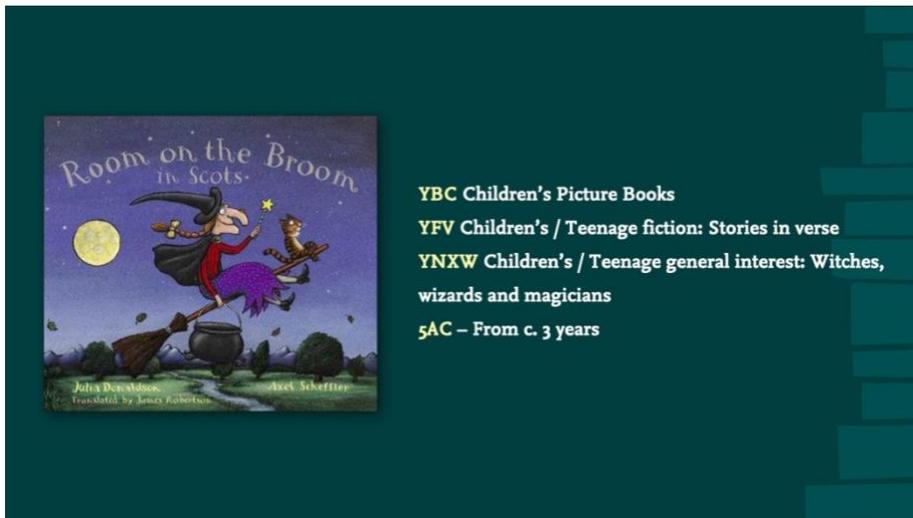
Here are three examples of different *Thema* subject category and qualifier combinations.³



Example 1 – a fantasy novel (FMH) that features dragons (VXQM1)

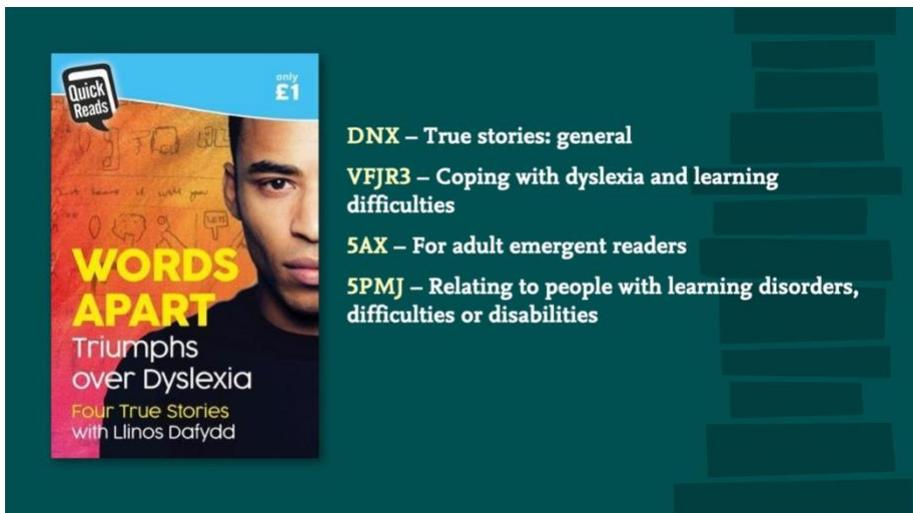
Did you know that *Thema* has a category for Unicorns? YNXB5 – Children's / Teenage general interest: Unicorns. You can create a cross-genre promotion around these ever popular creatures in your children's section.

³ For more examples of usage of *Thema* see the worked examples document on the EDItEUR website: <https://www.editeur.org/151/Thema/#Documentation>



Example 2 – a children's picture book (YBC), written in verse (YFV) and about witches (YNXW) and aimed at children from about 3 years and up (5AC). These subject categories are shared with all other versions of this book: the fact that this book has been translated into Scots doesn't affect what it's about – the language of the text would be elsewhere in the book's metadata.

Did you know that *Thema* has language qualifiers for all books that are ABOUT the Scots language (2ACC) and ONIX has a code for all books that are written IN the Scots language (sco)?



Example 3 – a collection of true stories (DNX) about people dealing with dyslexia (VFJR3) and written in a way that makes it approachable for adult emergent readers (5AX). The 5PMJ qualifier can be used on any title that is about or features people with learning difficulties. These qualifiers are important for building up lists across multiple subjects, and all ages.

Did you know *Thema* has qualifier codes to highlight titles about various holidays and occasions? If you are looking for titles about Diwali (5HPH) or the Day of the Dead (5HC-MX-D) or World Book Day (5HCU) you can use *Thema* to identify relevant titles.

6. But do I need to know all those codes to use Thema?

No. The codes themselves are meant for machine-to-machine exchange of metadata and they are not designed to be meaningful in themselves. It's the headings, whether those on the official *Thema* documents and browser or a retailer's own 'browse by subject' hierarchy, that will be used by humans for search purposes. There could be occasions when you search the *Thema* browser to find what the correct code for a particular topic would be, and then search a publisher, wholesaler or data aggregator site for that code. But just having an awareness or general appreciation of the codes can be helpful when approaching publishers, distributors, wholesalers or data providers with requests for lists of titles, or when searching for books on a particular topic.

Did you know that *Thema* has time period qualifiers (codes starting with 3*) that allow you to find all the titles about a particular period? If you want to find all the history books, or arts books or novels set in the 9th century then you can look for 3KHY and any qualifier starting with 3KHY*.

7. Is Thema meant only for online retailers?

Thema is for the *whole* of the book trade – not just for online and not just for digital products. The codes can be used to add titles to different sections of an online store, but they may also be present in stock systems, publishers' websites, catalogues, advanced information, wholesalers' ordering systems *etc*: they are a key part of the metadata that's available about a title. *Thema* can be used for books in any format, physical or digital, for audiobooks, and even for some promotional items and other general merchandise commonly sold in bookshops such as toys, games or puzzles.

Did you know that BOL.com in the Netherlands saw a significant increase in both discovery and conversion rate when it introduced *Thema* on its online store? See a presentation of a study from CB on the EDItEUR website <https://www.editeur.org/3/Events/Event-Details/497>

8. Where will I find Thema categories and qualifiers used in the book trade?

Although it's relatively new ⁴, *Thema* is already common throughout the supply chain, starting with publishers who add *Thema* to the metadata about a title, based on knowledge of the contents. Publishers store this information in their own internal databases and send '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 of title information also hold *Thema* categories and make them available to trade customers via their online

⁴ *Thema* is in fact very similar in structure to the much older BIC subject scheme. The BIC scheme is no longer being developed – its last update was in 2010 – so for many in the UK, *Thema* is simply 'the new BIC'

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 (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?” (1H* plus 5AJ).

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

Did you know that *Thema* place qualifier codes assigned to titles would allow you to create a local interest section? Qualifiers link across genres and subjects so that all the travel, history, politics, social sciences, novels, children's, teenage, sports, natural history, geography titles associated with that place could be found.

9. How does Thema relate to the other information a publisher sends out about a title?

In the global book supply chain, publishers, distributors and wholesalers manage and distribute a great deal of information about a single title. This includes bibliographic information, things like the title, information about the author, the potential audience, the name of the imprint or the series, the binding or file format, the number of pages, *etc*; marketing information, for example the description of the product, the cover image, reviews, associated events, *etc*; and business and supply chain information; such as the supplier, sales territories, the availability, prices and associated terms and conditions. Ideally, all this information is sent in a standardised machine-readable XML message format known as ONIX for Books⁵. *Thema* categories are sent within this message and should always be interpreted in context with the other metadata. For example, the description of a specialised children's book format like a pop-up or lift-the-flap, the fact that a product is a jigsaw puzzle, or an audiobook would be sent in an ONIX message using the appropriate ONIX codes: the physical format is not part of a subject category scheme like *Thema*⁶.

Did you know that *Thema* categories can be used to describe the subject of a game or a jigsaw puzzle as well as books? The subjects and qualifiers can be used throughout the book trade to 'shelve' products, and the ONIX format codes will tell you it's a jigsaw (ZJ) or a game (ZE).

⁵ If you want to know more about the ONIX standard you can read the documentation on this page <https://www.editeur.org/93/Release-3.0-Downloads/>

⁶ To read more about using Thema and ONIX together read the document on this page: <https://www.editeur.org/151/Thema/#Documentation>

10. What do I need to do to start making use of Thema?

Start by having a look at the online *Thema* browser to see the structure and explore the topics you're particularly interested in: <https://ns.editeur.org/thema> and familiarise yourself with how it works. Have a look at the other resources available for *Thema* on the EDItEUR website here:

<https://www.editeur.org/151/Thema/#Documentation> .

- Ask your data suppliers how they are using *Thema* codes and whether they use them to provide you with more targeted information, and whether the *Thema* codes are available to you?
- Do all your suppliers make *Thema* subject categories and qualifiers available in their catalogues, ordering systems and in the metadata they supply?
- Talk to your sales contacts about your needs for better subject information and what *Thema* categories and qualifiers interest you the most and how you can access this information?
- Consider whether the *Thema* hierarchy maps well to your existing shelving scheme
- Consider using *Thema* subject categories and qualifiers to drive 'browse by subject' on your website

Chris Saynor
EDItEUR
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