

“Hey. What Kind of Bar Code Is This?”

Sometimes you have a bar code and need to tell what kind it is. Identifying which bar code symbology you’re looking at is easy if you apply a few simple rules of thumb. There are ways to tell which barcode symbology is in front of you.

Answering three simple questions can go a long way to determining which type of bar code you’re dealing with:

- **What is the bar code on?** retail item, letter, form, etc.
- **Is it on US mail?** a part of the address block
- **What do the first and last set of bars look like?** the start and stop bars.

What is the bar code on?

If it’s on an item destined to be scanned at a cash register, it’s a UPC (US & Canada), JAN (Japan), or EAN (rest of the world) symbol. All of them usually have two notches on the bottom with numbers (and only numbers) inside the notches. UPC symbols have 5 digits in the left and right notches, EAN and JAN symbols have 6 digits in each notch. If there is only one notch, it’s a UPC version E barcode if it has 6 digits, and either a EAN-8 or a JAN-8 if there are 7 digits.



If the bar code in question is on a book, it’s probably a Bookland bar code. These are sometimes mistakenly called ISBN bar codes because they’re based on the ISBN number. Booklands begin with “978” and have a 5-digit supplemental bar code on the right. Some books that are likely to be sold at places other than bookstores often use a UPC bar code instead of or in addition to a Bookland. This includes children’s books, some religious books, and romance novels.

If it’s on a shipping label or an ID badge it’s probably either Code 128 or Code 39. Sometimes other symbologies are used but usually in specialized vertical market situations.

If it’s on a corrugated box it may be an Interleaved 2 of 5 symbol, especially if it has a 1/4" bar above and below it, or a 1/4" frame all around it.

If it is on a US letter and has tall and short bars, it’s POSTNET.

Is it on US mail?



POSTNET and the newer PLANET bar codes are used on US mail. POSTNET & PLANET bar codes encode the ZIP code and sometimes portions of the address. They are distinct in that they employ alternating tall and short bars, instead of alternating wide and narrow bars. The first and last bars are always tall.

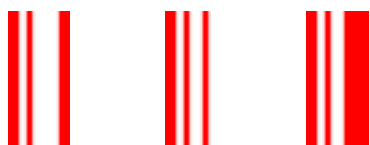
What do the first and last set of bars look like?

Most bar code scanners read a number of different bar code symbologies. They look for unique patterns of bars at the beginning and end of each symbol as a way to determine what type of bar code they're looking at. Similarly when creating a bar code, you must use the correct start and stop bars for the symbology at hand. Therefore if you can identify the start and stops bars, you can tell what kind of bar code you're looking at.



Code 39 is one of the oldest and most widespread bar codes in use. It uses the asterisk as its start and stop bar. Look for the same pattern of bars on the left and the right sides. The pattern is narrow bar, wide space, narrow bar, narrow space, wide bar, narrow space, wide bar, narrow space, narrow bar.

Code 128 is commonly used for ID, inventory, tracking, and especially in the shipping industry. There are three main dialects of Code 128: code set A, code set B, and code set C. All three code sets use the same stop bars on the right. Identify the stop bars correctly and you'll know it's Code 128.



Once you've narrowed it down to Code 128 based on the stop bars on the right, see if you can isolate the start bars on the left so you'll know which code set - A, B, or C - it is.

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