

101 Ways to Use Braille

by Ellen Ringlein

From the Editor: The following article first appeared in the Summer, 1998, issue of the *Braille Spectator*, a publication of the NFB of Maryland. Ellen Ringlein is the Braille instructor in the rehabilitation program at Blind Industries and Services of Maryland. Here is her thoughtful article on the many practical uses of Braille, even for the novice.



Ellen Ringlein reading Braille

Have you ever opened a can, hoping to add tomatoes to your spaghetti sauce, and then been faced with the dilemma of figuring out how to incorporate green beans into the menu? Have you spent hours searching for a particular CD or tape, becoming increasingly frustrated with each incorrect CD you briefly sampled? Or have you ever been worried about losing your phone service because you mislaid the bill and are unable to find it in your mile-high stack of mysterious print papers? In all these cases Braille could simplify your life.

It is surprising how many blind people who know some Braille do not take full advantage of what this powerful tool can offer. Louis Braille's invention was revolutionary because for the first time blind people had the ability not only to read but also to write. Herein lies Braille's power: it enables you to communicate with yourself. Braille serves the same function for the blind as print does for the sighted, and with a little creative thinking it can be just as versatile. The use of Braille extends beyond reading books and magazines from the library for the blind; it can also be employed to take notes, keep records, and label everything under the sun. Once you start thinking creatively about how your Braille skills can serve you better, you will be

amazed at how versatile Louis Braille's little invention actually can be. Here are some tips for getting started. Soon you will wonder how you ever functioned without Braille. Your only boundaries will be imposed by the limits of your imagination.

A Few Simple Tools

Using Braille as an organizational tool most often requires labeling or writing down a few simple directions. Either a slate and stylus (a metal guide and a punching device equivalent to the pencil or pen) or a Braille writer (comparable to a typewriter) can be used. Labels are perhaps most commonly made with Dymo Transparent Labeling Tape, made by 3M. This vinyl tape, with a self-adhesive back protected with an easily removable strip, comes in a twelve-foot roll. The half-inch width accommodates both standard and jumbo Braille. The Braille labeling gun, as well as the Dymo tape attachment for the Perkins Braille writer, are designed for this width. Moreover, many slates on the market today now have a half-inch Dymo-tape slot. However, the experienced Braillist can easily center the narrower 3/8th inch width in this slot and produce labels in standard sized Braille. For cosmetic reasons and for the convenience of any sighted members of your household, you may prefer the almost transparent tape, which does not obscure what is underneath the Braille label. Since transparent Dymo tape is often not readily available commercially, you may have to purchase it from a supplier specializing in products for the blind.

These labels can be directly affixed to the desired object after the backing is peeled off, or they can be attached with a rubber band threaded through a hole punched with a one-hole punch. The latter type has the advantage of being reusable. You can take them with you to the grocery store and immediately mark the can of green beans or chocolate pudding mix you are purchasing. Labels can also be written on index cards or other pieces of Braille paper (usually three to five times heavier than typing paper) and attached with Scotch or masking tape or even a rubber band. Paper clips and a stapler also come in handy when labeling print documents. If you have most of the above basic tools, then you are ready to put Braille to work for you.

In the Kitchen

Braille labels are especially useful in the kitchen. Attaching paper or Dymo tape labels to canned goods, jars, and other packaged foods helps to take some of the uncertainty out of cooking. You no longer have to shake a can to try to guess at its contents; your label will positively identify the green beans. Sticking a Dymo tape label directly on small spice containers is most effective since you can read it more easily this way. Since you will be using your cinnamon or coriander jar over a period of time, you won't feel that you are wasting expensive Dymo tape.

In preparing foods it is crucial not only to identify the correct ingredients but also to follow the

indicated procedure. For storage keep them in a three-ring binder; you can Braille your own recipes on regular Braille paper or on plastic sheets (which can be wiped off should you spill flour, tomato sauce, or baby food on them). You can also make note of directions for preparing such packaged foods as Stove Top stuffing or chocolate pound cake and either keep them in your folder or attach them directly to the package itself.

Other Household Uses

The same techniques which proved valuable in the kitchen are just as useful in other household areas. Labeling your cleaning supplies with Dymo tape, for example, eliminates the possibility of confusing your oven cleaner with your furniture polish. You can also label such items as shampoo and conditioner bottles, which often feel the same, so that you can differentiate between them before you pour the contents into your hand or onto your hair. Dymo tape also works for labeling different colored spools of thread. Place the tape on the flat side of the spool. Now you can choose the appropriate color thread for mending or sewing on buttons.

You can also identify different colored yarns for knitting and crocheting by storing them in separate Ziploc bags with index cards noting their colors. This method also works for keeping various shades of pantyhose separated. Other clothes can be marked by sewing in Braille labels. Again several options are available. These include Braille on garment labeling tape, which is similar to Dymo tape but without the adhesive backing, and making use of prefabricated metal labels.

Appliances

Labeling the controls on some household appliances may also prove helpful. Many modern microwaves have no tactilely detectable buttons. Here Braille labels can serve a dual purpose: not only do they help to locate the function keys, they also identify them. Even if appliances have tactile controls, it may still prove useful to label some of them, especially if you do not want to make the effort to remember many different settings. Thus you may wish to attach Dymo tape labels to your dishwasher, your washing machine, and your dryer. These labels are especially helpful with the type of washing machines which use a dial to select different wash cycles. You can use little triangle-shaped Dymo tape arrows to point to the beginnings of various stages and place some identifying letters or words nearby.

You will probably not need or want to label every single appliance in your home, especially those that you are already familiar with or others which are simple to use. But, on the other hand, do not be shy about labeling anything; after all, the manufacturers always include print labels for sighted consumers.

Some complex appliances such as video cassette recorders may require a different approach. In

addition to labeling some buttons, you may wish to make note of the layout of the control panel since there may not be enough room to label all keys. You may also want to write down the sequence of steps for operating your machine. As you are programming the VCR, you can then refer to your notes on the procedure. If you have a remote control device with a complicated layout, you may again wish to take notes on the function of each key. After all you will want to take full advantage of the power of your remote control when you are lounging in your recliner, zapping through TV channels.

Enhancing Recreation

Perhaps the most frequently labeled items are compact discs, audio and video cassettes, and records. In this information age you will also need to label your computer disks. Again you will probably want to choose Dymo tape for your labeling medium. While you can record the artist's name and album title and perhaps some other limited information of your choice on the compact disk box, you should not place a label on the compact disk itself. With audio and video cassettes you can label both the cassette and its container. The record cover can also be easily labeled, as can the record itself, as long as you confine yourself to the center, which also holds the print label. You may wish to follow a consistent format in labeling the covers of the above items, e.g., placing the artist's name on the spine of the audio tape so that you can arrange the tapes alphabetically and easily retrieve a specific tape later. Your favorite Mozart sonata or Beatles album will then be at your fingertips in moments.

In all the above instances Braille is employed to adapt materials so that blind people can make more effective use of them. Sometimes already labeled materials are available for purchase. Popular choices include Monopoly and Scrabble. Although you can also buy already labeled playing cards, it is easy to make your own with a slate. Special slates have been designed for this purpose; however, any slate will do.

Organizing Print Materials

Braille is a very effective organizing tool for identifying and managing print materials. You can label your bills using a slate or a Braille writer for easy reference, noting on the envelope to whom the check must be issued, the amount due, and the payment deadline—no more worries about that missing phone bill. After writing out your checks, you can also label them in Braille with the check number, the date, the amount, the name of the recipient, and any additional information you need. When the checks are returned in your bank statement, you can determine which ones have cleared, even if you do not receive a Braille statement. If you are using carbon checks, you can use the Braille information on your carbon to draw up your Braille check register.

It is also helpful to label other important print documents to which you may need to refer later.

These Braille labels, which can be written directly on the print item or noted on a separate piece of paper and either paper-clipped or stapled to the item, help to locate the document as well as to identify such important information as the account number on an insurance policy. Of course Braille is also invaluable in filing these documents. You can either write directly on a file folder or attach a Dymo tape label. The latter is easier to read and stands up to more wear and tear.

You can also create a Braille index card file using commercially available materials for any names, addresses, and telephone numbers. You can employ the same methods to label the alphabetic dividers as you used to label file folders.

But perhaps the most innovative labeling technique is the use of Dymo tape to mark your credit, ATM, insurance, and airline frequent flyer cards, etc. As long as you do not cover up the magnetic strip and your signature on the card, you should not experience any problems, even using an ATM machine. Never again will you have to resort to asking a stranger to paw through your wallet to select the card you need.

Of course Braille is not the only method for keeping track of information and for identifying and labeling items. You can use tape recorders, electronic note-taking devices, and computers to store and retrieve information, and other tactile identifiers such as rubber bands, strips of tape, or raised symbols made with glue or Hi-Marks® to mark items. However, none of these is as flexible and versatile as Braille for managing personal and household tasks. Far from becoming obsolete, Braille continues to be a valuable self-management tool.

Whether you are a whiz at Grade II Braille, just know Grade I, or use jumbo Braille, you will discover that with a little imagination Braille can serve you in countless ways. If you follow some of these suggestions and are stimulated to implement your own ideas, you will soon wonder how you ever managed without Braille—no more spaghetti with green beans for dinner. You can listen to the music of your choice and rest assured that you can locate that phone bill to pay it on time. Perhaps even some of you neophytes have had your appetites whetted and will be inspired to take the plunge and start learning the alphabet.