

What Is Braille and What Does It Mean to the Blind?

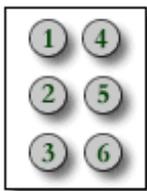


Louis Braille

Braille was first developed about 1820 by a young Frenchman named Louis Braille. He created Braille by modifying a system of night writing which was intended for use on board ships. He did this work as a very young man and had it complete by the time he was about 18. He and his friends at the school for the blind he attended found that reading and writing dots was much faster than reading raised print letters which could not be written by hand at all. The development of this system by young Louis Braille is now recognized as the most important single development in making it possible for the blind to get a good education.

It took more than a century, however, before people would accept Braille as an excellent way for the blind to read and write. Even today many people underestimate the effectiveness of Braille. While tapes and records are enjoyable, Braille is essential for note taking and helpful for studying such things as math, spelling, and foreign languages.

Experienced Braille readers, however, read Braille at speeds comparable to print readers--200 to 400 words a minute. Such Braille readers say that the only limitation of Braille is that there isn't enough material available.

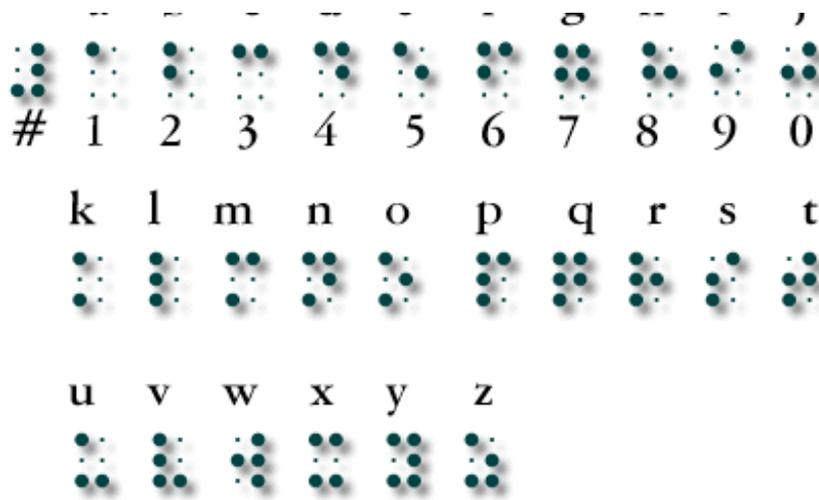


Braille consists of arrangements of dots which make up letters of the alphabet, numbers and punctuation marks. The basic Braille symbol is called the Braille cell and consists of six dots arranged in the formation of a rectangle, three dots high and two across. Other symbols consist of only some of these six dots. The six dots are commonly referred to by number according to their position in the cell.

There are no different symbols for capital letters in Braille. Capitalization is accomplished by placing a dot 6 in the cell just before the letter that is capitalized. The first ten letters of the alphabet are used to make numbers. These are preceded by a number sign which is dots 3-4-5-6. Thus, 1 is number sign a; 2 is number sign b; 10 is number sign a-j and 193 is number sign a-i-c.

The Braille Alphabet

a b c d e f g h i i



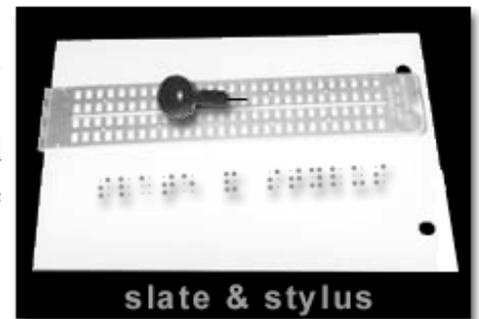
Some abbreviations are used in standard American Braille in order to reduce its bulk. These must be memorized, but most Braille readers and writers find them convenient, rather than a problem. Braille is written on heavy paper, and the raised dots prevent the pages from lying smoothly together as they would in a print book. Therefore, Braille books are quite bulky. A



Braille writing machine (comparable to a typewriter) has a keyboard of only six keys and a space bar, instead of one key for each letter of the alphabet. These keys can be pushed separately or altogether. If they are all pushed at the same time they will cause six dots to be raised on the paper in the formation of a Braille cell.

Pushing various combinations of the keys on the Braille writer produces different letters of the alphabet and other Braille symbols.

Writing Braille with a slate and stylus compares to writing print with a pen and pencil. The stylus is used to push dots down through the paper, while the slate serves as a guide. The Braille slate can be made of metal or plastic and is hinged so that there is a guide under the paper and on top of it. A person writing Braille with the slate and stylus begins at the right side of the paper and ends the line on the left, since the dots are being produced on the underside of the paper. Of course, the Braille reader reads from left to right, for the dots are then on the top side of the paper. Although this may seem a bit confusing, it need not be at all troublesome, since both reading and writing progress through words and sentences from beginning to end in the same manner. The speed of writing Braille with the slate and stylus is about the same as the speed of writing print with pen or pencil.



Braille embossing devices can be attached to computers instead of or in addition to regular inkprint printers. A special computer program converts the print text to Braille. This gives blind people access to the same information sighted people get from computers. It is a matter of great concern to members of the National Federation of the Blind that fewer blind people now have the opportunity to become good Braille users than twenty-five years ago. A controversy now exists as to who should learn Braille and under what

circumstances, but certain things are generally agreed upon. Blind children (and also adults) should make full use of computers, tape recorders, and any other available technology. Visually impaired children should be encouraged to make the best use of any eyesight they have, including learning to read print.

But a legally blind child (one with less than ten percent of normal eyesight) cannot function efficiently using print alone. Sighted children have computers and recorders, but they still learn to read print. They use both eyes and ears to get information. Likewise, if a blind or severely visually impaired child is to compete, not only ears but also fingers should be used. Technology enhances but does not substitute for the printed word.

Then why the controversy? Many of today's teachers of blind children take a single college course on how to teach Braille but cannot read or write it. Because of their lack of knowledge, they tend to think Braille is slow and inefficient. Being uncomfortable with what they don't know, they say that Braille is not needed and opt for expensive technology.

There is also the fact that blindness still carries with it a stigma, and many (including some parents and teachers) want blind children to pretend to have sight they don't possess so as not to be considered blind the same thing black people did fifty years ago when some tried to lighten their skins and straighten their hair to try to cross the color line. It didn't work and wasn't healthy for black people. The same is true for the blind. The National Federation of the Blind believes it is respectable to be blind, and we don't try to hide it. Thousands of blind people read Braille at four hundred words per minute. There's no substitute for Braille in taking notes, reading a speech, looking up words in a dictionary, studying a complicated text, or just having the fun of reading for yourself. Talk of forcing blind children to learn Braille shows the prejudice. Nobody talks of forcing sighted children to learn print. It is taken for granted as a right, a necessary part of education; so it should be with Braille and blind children. The National Federation of the Blind is asking state licensing officials to require teachers of the blind and visually handicapped to be competent in reading and writing Braille and to require that instruction in Braille be available to every visually handicapped child if parents want it. The National Federation of the Blind believes that no child is hurt by learning Braille, print, or any other skill. The federal act often cited as the excuse for not making Braille universally available to the blind is misquoted. The requirement that each child's individual needs be met was never meant as a cop-out for teachers and an excuse for illiteracy. Just as with the sighted, we the blind need every skill we can get to compete in today's world. With proper training we can hold our own with the best.

[Back to Top](#)

E-mail: webmaster@nfb.org

Updated June 20, 2002