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# Let Us Talk About Braille

*By Monica Williams*

January is Braille Literacy Month, and I know you may be wondering what braille or braille literacy is, and why is it so important to blind and visually impaired individuals. For starters, reading and writing is important for everyone. If you don’t develop these skills at a young age, you won’t succeed in life. Braille enables blind and visually impaired people to be literate citizens of society, and it helps people who are new to blindness continue their literacy journey.

Upon entering the world and journey of blindness, life got crazy for me. I could no longer use my eyes to continue my love for reading and writing. I not only love reading for pleasure or necessity, but I am also a poet and writer. Not being able to read or write left me existing in my own place of insanity. In addition, I came to realize it is nice to have audiobooks to listen to, but there is nothing like being able to read or write on your own. The journey improved greatly when I was taught how to read and write braille. Because of this, I can independently read and write as well as continue being the writer I was passionately destined to be. This is why I proudly encourage blind and visually impaired people to learn braille. Braille changes lives.

When I volunteered to draft this article, I became so excited because knowledge is power. Not to mention, I do not believe in leaving others behind. My enthusiastic purpose is to hopefully educate you about braille, so we can be powerful together. So, take my hand and let’s walk, dance, and get moving. I hope you will enjoy reading this as I did. Let’s celebrate Braille Literacy Month together!

## What is braille?

Braille Works, 2012

Braille is a form of writing for blind people. Characters are represented by interchangeable patterns of six raised dots and felt with the fingertips. Braille is not a language. Rather, it is a code by which many languages—such as English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and dozens of others—may be written and read. Braille is used by thousands of people all over the world in their native languages and provides a means of literacy for all. The specific code used in the United States has been English Braille, American Edition but as of 2016 the main code for reading material is Unified English Braille, a code used in seven other English-speaking countries.

## Braille History and Its Creator

**The Reading Fingers: Life of Louis Braille, 1809–1852**

By Jean Roblin

Louis Braille (1809-1852) was a French educator who developed and created a way for blind people to be able to read and write.

* He lost his sight when he was three as the result of an accident with a tool in his father’s harness-making shop.
* At the age of 10, he was awarded a scholarship to the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris. At the Royal Institute, students were taught to read books that used embossed print letters. Reading was slow, and it was difficult to write by hand.
* Mr. Braille was inspired after an army captain visited and demonstrated “night writing”. Night writing was created to allow soldiers to communicate silently on the battlefield using a raised-dot alphabet. Braille found the system complicated. Between the ages of 13 and 16, he worked to modify it, changing a twelve-dot system to the six-dot cell and is still being used today.
* At 20 years old, Mr. Braille published *Procedure for Writing Words, Music, and Plainsong in Dots*, but students had to learn braille on their own because his method was not officially taught during his lifetime.
* Mr. Braille became a professor at the Royal Institute and remained there, teaching history, geometry, and algebra, until his death in 1852.
* He did not receive formal recognition in his lifetime. The braille code was not adopted in France as the official reading and writing system for people who are blind until 1854. In 1878, the World Congress for the Blind followed suit, making braille official worldwide.
* The French government marked the centennial of Louis Braille’s death by honoring him as a national hero and moving his remains from the village cemetery in Kouprey to Paris to be interred in the Pantheon. Some of the inhabitants of Vouvray objected to losing their favorite son, so as a compromise, Braille’s hands remain in a casket by his empty tomb.

If you are interested in further reading about the history of Louis Braille, here are some books you can read.

**For Adults:**

* **Triumph over Darkness: The Life of Louis Braille by** Lennard Bickel
* **Louis Braille: Windows for the Blind** by J. Alvin Kugelmass
* **Louis Braille: A Touch of Genius** by C. Michael Mellor

**For Children:**

* **A Picture Book of Louis Braille** by David A. Adler
* **Louis Braille: Inventor** by Jennifer Bryant
* **Six Dots** by Jennifer Bryant

## Facts About Braille

January is Braille Literacy Month, in honor of the birthday of Louis Braille, who was born on January 4th, 1809. Here are some fun facts about braille:

* Braille was first introduced in the United States in 1854 and taught for the first time at the Missouri School for the blind.
* In honor to Louis Braille, the US government declared January to be National Braille Literacy Month in 1882 and designated January 4th as National Braille Day.
* The six-dot format Mr. Braille created was not officially accepted here until 1917. Up until then, competing systems of Boston Line Type, Moon Type, American Braille, British Braille, and New York Point were all used.
* Braille is not considered a language. However, there are different codes for almost every language including Spanish, Chinese and French. There is also a separate code used for music and math.
* There are six dots that primarily create the coding system. These six-dot braille cells have 63 possible combinations, arranged as two columns of three dots.
* Braille is for feet too! Have you ever come across those big, yellow ends of a sidewalk or store? That’s braille for your feet.
* There are two versions of braille – contracted and uncontracted. Uncontracted braille spells out every word, while contracted braille abbreviates common words (example would be do not and don’t).
* There is a Braille Olympics, known as the Braille Challenge, which takes place at the Los Angeles Braille Institute. Students from Canada and the United States compete to demonstrate their braille skills in reading comprehension and writing.
* A slate and stylus is a portable way to write notes and more in braille.

I will be ending this article by leaving you with this statement. I will not stop moving because I believe in the philosophy of the National Federation of the Blind, “You can live the life you want to live.”



# Braille Literacy and Our Advocacy Work

*By Lyn Eberhardt*

Braille is an important tool in the life of a blind or visually impaired individual; especially for children to be able to read, learn, and receive proper education. Unfortunately, this is not always accessible for elementary and secondary school students in the state of Georgia. There are many scenarios where blind/visually impaired students do not have access to the necessary tools to keep up with their sighted counterparts due to schools not having braille literature, teachers not knowing how to read braille and not accepting the work and taking too long to receive the textbook literature in braille causing the student to fall behind.

It's time to take a stand! Bill GA SB4 2023-2024 is a bill to be entitled An Act to amend Part 3 of Article 6 of Chapter 2 of Title 20 of the OCGA relating to educational programs in elementary and secondary education so as to enact the Blind Person’s Braille Literacy Rights and Education Act; to provide definitions; to require an evaluation of a blind or visually impaired student to determine the student’s need for braille; to require braille instruction in the individualized education program of the blind or visually impaired student; to provide additional requirements for the individual; to provide textbook publishers relating to electronic material; to provide license requirements for teachers; to provide for related matters; to reveal conflicting laws and for other purposes.

Now is your chance to make a difference! You can call and/or email your representative and ask them to support this bill and its importance to you and the blind/visually impaired community. Also, you can attend ‘The Day at the Capitol’ in Atlanta Georgia, Day and time to be determined. Let’s advocate and empower our children to develop strong literacy skills!

# Resources

## Free Slate and Stylus

The National Federation of the Blind will distribute a plastic, four-line, twenty-eight cell slate along with a saddle stylus to those that need them. That includes those that are blind and low vision who know Braille or want to learn Braille.  You can learn more by visiting the NFB website at <https://nfb.org/programs-services/free-slate-and-stylus-program>.

## Free Books

The following companies provide free braille books:

* [American Action Fund for Blind Children and Adults](http://www.actionfund.org/)
* [American Printing House for the Blind](http://www.aph.org/)
* [Braille Institute of America, Inc.](http://www.brailleinstitute.org/)
* [Seeing Hands](http://www.seeinghands.org/)
* [Temple Beth El Sisterhood Braille Bindery Volunteer](https://www.tbeonline.org/engage/volunteer-opportunities/)

## Learn Braille with Music

If you learn well using music and mnemonics, you can also check out [this](https://www.perkins.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/braille_rap.mp3) braille learning rap! The Braille Rap Song was written by Lynn Horton and Tammy Whitten as a fun way to teach braille to their students at the Helen Keller School located in Talladega, AL. The full lyrics are also available for [download from Paths to Literacy](https://www.pathstoliteracy.org/strategies/braille-rap-song), a website for parents and educators of students with visual impairment sponsored by Perkins and TSBVI.

## Diverse Braille Learning

Hadley offers several courses to learn braille by touch or sight. These courses are perfect for instruction at home. You can find out more by visiting their website at <https://hadley.edu/learn>.

# Support Our BELL Academy

The National Federation of the Blind of Georgia Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (NFB BELL) Academy is a summer program that prepares blind and low-vision children to grow into confident and independent blind people who live the lives they want. Since 2010, we have served countless students, helping them develop literacy and other blindness skills through educational and extracurricular activities. It is almost time for us to ring the bells this year, and we need your support to make it happen. Donate today at <https://nfbga.org/donate-now>. We appreciate your generosity in advance!