History of Braille

What is Braille?

Braille is a system of touch reading and writing for blind persons in which raised dots represent the letters of the alphabet. Braille also contains equivalents for punctuation marks and provides symbols to show letter groupings.

Braille is read by moving the hand or hands from left to right along each line. Both hands are usually involved in the reading process, and reading is generally done with the index fingers. The average reading speed is about 125 words per minute, but greater speeds of up to 200 words per minute are possible.

By using braille, blind people can review and study the written word. They can also become aware of different written conventions such as spelling, punctuation, paragraphing and footnotes.

Most of all, braille gives blind individuals access to a wide range of reading materials including educational and recreational reading, financial statements and restaurant menus. Equally important are contracts, regulations, insurance policies, directories and cookbooks that are all part of daily adult life. Through braille, people who are blind can also pursue hobbies and cultural enrichment with materials such as music scores, hymnals, playing cards, and board games.

Various other methods had been attempted over the years to enable reading for the blind, many of them raised versions of print letters. It is generally accepted that the braille system has succeeded because it is based on a rational sequence of signs devised for the fingertips, rather than imitating signs devised for the eyes.

Braille History

A blind eleven-year-old boy took a secret code devised for the French military and modified it to create the basis for written communication for blind individuals. Louis Braille, newly enrolled at the National Institute of the Blind in Paris, spent nine years developing and refining the system of raised dots that has come to be known by his name.

The original military code was called "night writing" and was used by soldiers to communicate after dark. It was based on a twelve-dot cell, two dots wide by six dots high. Each dot or combination of dots within the cell stood for a letter or a phonetic sound. The problem with the military code was that the human fingertip could not feel all the dots with one touch.

Louis Braille refined the code to be based on a cell of six dots. This crucial improvement meant that a fingertip could encompass the entire cell unit with one impression and move rapidly from one cell to the next. Over time, braille gradually came to be accepted throughout the world as the fundamental form of written communication for blind individuals, and today it remains basically as he invented it.

There have been some modifications to the braille system, particularly the addition of contractions representing groups of letters or whole words that appear frequently in a language. The use of contractions permits faster braille reading and helps reduce the size of braille books, making them less cumbersome.

Several groups have been established over the last century to modify and standardize the braille code. A major goal is to develop easily understood contractions without making the code too complex.