

BRAILLE FAQs

What is braille?

Braille is a tactile (touch) alphabet used by blind people to read and write. All braille letters or symbols are formed within-- a braille cell. Each braille "cell" can contain up to six dots (two columns of three), numbered 1-6. The dots "raised" in each cell determine what the letter or symbol means. Braille is not a language but can be used when reading and writing any language. English braille uses the same rules for writing and punctuation that English uses.

Is braille hard to learn?

Braille is taught on a one-to-one basis and can be learned by individuals at any age. For success in reading and writing braille, an individual must be motivated to learn and practice as it takes time, patience, the ability to memorize and to recall what was learned. Because braille requires the reader to feel the braille cells, braille may be challenging to learn for individuals with loss of feeling in the hands and fingers. Others with a cognitive impairment, dementia, Alzheimer's, a history of strokes, additional disabilities and those with poor fine motor coordination may also have difficulty learning braille. Individuals who have not learned to read in English will experience more difficulty when learning braille.

What are braille grades? Do I have to start learning braille at Grade I?

There are two levels or grades of braille. Everyone starts braille instruction with Grade I which is also known as uncontracted braille. It consists of the braille letter-for-letter substitution of the print counterpart. Some individuals may wish to also learn Grade II braille, or contracted braille. Grade II braille is made up of contractions that substitute shorter sequences for the full spelling of commonly occurring words or letter groups. Grade II braille makes it possible to read more quickly and requires less storage space.

How long does it take to learn braille?

The time it takes to learn braille often depends on an individual's goals for using braille. If an individual wishes to learn Grade I braille only, they may be able to learn braille in a few short months. If an individual wishes to fluently read and write Grade II braille, they will need to learn contracted braille which can take over one year to learn. The learner's motivation and commitment to learning braille will also impact the time it takes to learn.

Who teaches braille?

A Vision Rehabilitation Therapist (VRT) teaches braille to adults who have English literacy. A Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI) teaches braille to children who are learning to read.

<https://hadley.edu/> provides courses for individuals, sighted or visually impaired, to learn braille by touch or by sight. Hadley uses a combination of online courses, braille workbooks, and audio instruction to teach braille to new learners or those wanting to fine tune their braille skills. To get started, visit <https://hadley.edu/>.

How much does it cost to learn braille?

If an individual has been declared legally blind by their eye doctor, they are eligible for services at no cost through the New York State Commission for the Blind (NYSCB). These services include braille instruction.

What is the New York State Commission for the Blind and how do I contact them?

The NYS Commission for the Blind (NYSCB) is part of the Office of Children and Family Services. The mission is to enhance employability, to maximize independence and to assist in the development of the capacities and strengths of people who are legally blind. For more information or to find a local District Office, you may call: 1-866-871-3000.

I can use print to some degree, is there any reason for me to learn braille?

The simple answer is yes, you may find braille to be another useful tool in your communication toolbox. Individuals who have low vision may benefit from knowing braille and using it for routine tasks or extended reading. Braille can reduce eye fatigue caused by holding papers close or reading for long periods. Braille can be more portable than other mediums such as desktop computers, extra-large printed materials, or reading machines. For the person with low vision, the final decision doesn't have to be one medium only, but a combination of what works best for the situation.

There is evidence that visually impaired braille users are more likely to be employed than visually impaired print users. Job seekers must be able to read quickly and efficiently to be competitive in the labor market. Many visually impaired individuals who rely on print read more slowly and have less stamina for prolonged reading than do their fully sighted peers. Braille readers can achieve reading rates comparable to those of print readers. For individuals whose vision is adequate to read print, but not adequate for competing successfully with fully sighted print readers, a combination of print and braille may be the most viable option. They might want to use braille for routine tasks, such as labeling and marking appliances or reviewing materials, while using print for accessing new information and editing. Other people choose to learn braille so they can read smoothly

when presenting publicly; confidently reading notes without concerns about having many pages, not reading a teleprompter, or holding papers in front of their face.

Your eye medical diagnosis may be another factor for considering braille as a reading medium. If your medical eye condition is one where you may lose more vision, you may want to think about starting braille lessons, so you have different reading mediums available to you. Since learning braille takes substantial time, beginning lessons while you are able to use print may be helpful.

How could braille help me in my everyday life?

Braille can be used the same way print is helpful, meaning frequent usage, usually dozens of times daily.

Using braille, an individual may identify their food items, cleaning supplies, medications, clothing, and cosmetics. Braille can be used so an individual can set appliances at home or at work independently. It can be used to read your grocery list or a “to-do” list and review your appointments for the day.

At work, braille can be used for notetaking, organizing office material, reading memos etc. Individuals can use braille at work to locate the correct restroom and other places of importance independently. Combined with technology which allows a reader to access computer files, the braille reader can perform all routine tasks at college or work. In the community, braille signs, menus and ATM machines provide the reader the ability to independently choose a meal or the correct floor they want in the building and use the ATM. Of course, braille allows the reader to enjoy reading for special interests, hobbies and recreation, just as print reading allows.

Am I too old to learn braille?

Braille can be learned at any age, if the person is motivated, practices, has good cognitive skills and is able to differentiate the braille dots. You may want to consider learning based upon your potential use of it. A motivated learner is welcomed at any age by an instructor.

If I learn braille, where will I get books?

Legally blind individuals can obtain braille books for free from the NYS Talking Book and Braille Library after submitting a patron application. Materials are sent directly to your home postage-free. <https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/tbbl>. Braille books can also be purchased from printing companies which produce them.

My child is blind. Should we learn braille?

A Teacher of Students who are Visually Impaired (TVI) will work with your child's educational team. The TVI will assess if braille should be part of the teaching goals and then provide instruction. As a parent, you may want to learn the same alphabet as your child so you can send personalized birthday and special occasion cards, play games, label items around the house, check homework and encourage literacy. There are "twin vision" children's books with both print and braille for families to share and enjoy together, even if you do not learn braille. These books can be loaned from the Talking Book and Braille Library even before the child begins instruction, just as print books are available to sighted preschoolers.

New York State Commission for the Blind (NYSCB)

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*NYSCB is part of the
New York State Office of Children and Family Services*