

**Braille Equals Literacy and Independence**  
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I want to share why braille is so important to me. I was three years old when my great grandfather taught me to read. He was a steelworker who was self-educated. In his nineties, he had the time to spend with a lively curious great grandchild. He took me for walks, enjoying teaching me the names of wild flowers and to use big words to amaze my young mother. His gnarled old finger would move along a line of print in one of my children's books or in his huge old family Bible. I would read the words out loud or spell them if I didn't recognize them. In which case, he would say them for me. By age six, I had lost this loving man and print had become too blurred for me to see it clearly. The world around me had become a much darker, smaller place.

Although she had never finished high school, my mother taught all of her five children to love reading, in fact, if she seemed inattentive at the table, we could be sure that she was lost in the print on the back of the cereal box or the label of the catsup bottle!

I became totally blind shortly after my eighth birthday. It was then that braille came into my life. Books once again became open doors to the world. My fingers could literally do my walking through time, space, and anywhere the human mind could

travel, I never felt alone when other children played games my blindness kept me from participating in, if I had a book to read.

Friends and wonderful adventures were there for me between the pages of a braille book. I didn't even miss the colorful illustrations because the lines of braille permitted me to imagine the characters and scenes as I wished. I could familiarize myself with objects I would never be able to explore with my own curious little hands. I could meet people and go places I would never know personally. I taught sighted friends braille so that we could pass notes that the teachers couldn't decipher, even if they intercepted them. Best of all, unlike my sighted siblings, I could read in bed under the covers after the lights were out.

Braille has allowed me to learn foreign languages; mathematics and even enjoy leisure activities such as macramé, computers and knitting. These things would have been much harder to access if I had been limited to using tapes. It is so difficult to locate specific information on a long tape. Being a braille user has made me capable of a greater independence. I can keep notes, mark clothing, canned goods, and spices. I can locate places such as rest rooms and use elevators independently when braille signage is available. When they were small, I shared my love of books with my own children using print/braille combination books we could read together.

As they grew older, I read some of my childhood favorites to them as they dressed for school and ate breakfast. Since I was a working mother, this reading time was special, replacing the bedtime reading my schedule no longer permitted.

Braille notes helped me through high school. I was the first member of my large family to attain a college education. Although my textbooks and lectures were recorded, I made voluminous braille notes for study purposes.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, braille aided me in improving the lives of Western Samoan children far from the availability of talking computers, watches and calculators. I used blocks of wood drilled with six holes into which wooden dowels could be placed to form braille letters. Later, the class moved on to forming words and sentences with rounded nail heads placed in rows of smaller holes. Eventually, we did acquire braille paper and Perkins Braillewriters. I was able to train transcribers and develop a braille code for the Samoan language. Before I left Western Samoa, work transcribing the Samoan Bible had begun and the first blind child to be mainstreamed was attending public high school.

Because I can read braille I am literate, with access to the written word. Braille books and magazines have filled otherwise empty hours sitting in waiting rooms, or riding on buses, trains and planes.

A slate and stylus (no batteries required) have permitted me to write down appointments, shopping lists, phone numbers, addresses, etc. When technology has failed, old braille files and notes have saved the day.

Braille maps and diagrams have helped me grasp concepts that I would have had trouble learning if limited to verbal descriptions. Braille notations on important printed papers have made it possible to locate them in files. Braille games such as Scrabble, cards, and Monopoly have permitted me to participate in family fun. Making braille dots with French knots on hair bands and other small accessories helped me to dress attractively, enabling me to coordinate colors. I could teach my sighted daughters their colors, too, by commenting on them as I matched their clothing that was also marked with braille. Exchanging braille letters with friends granted me a privacy in correspondence I could not have had otherwise.

Since early childhood, I have loved putting my thoughts down on paper. Even with the advent of talking computers, I still find braille my ideas a first step toward creating a story or article. Although I often listen to a novel on audiotape while performing routine tasks, it is braille that I turn to for relaxed pleasure reading.

When I wish to master a new skill, such as using an unfamiliar computer program, I understand and learn more quickly if braille documentation is

available. When I became owner/manager of a pizza franchise, I kept inventory and order lists in braille. My husband claims that I inherited my mother's failing and would read catsup labels too if they were brailled!

It is almost impossible to count the ways in which braille has impacted my life, enhancing my existence daily. Independence, leisure activities, educational assistance, competency as a businesswoman and mother, are only the obvious areas where braille has improved the quality of my life.

All this richness was mine because of six dots, arranged two wide and three high. A young Frenchman who wanted to learn gave the world a great gift. The little girl, who first experienced it at her great grandfather's knee, regained the miracle of the written word through his efforts. She will never be able to fully express her thanks or imagine what her life would have been like without braille.

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