

LOUIS BRAILLE

January 4, 1809 – January 6, 1852



Louis Braille invented the raised dot system of reading and writing for the blind and visually impaired. This tactile method permits the specially trained user to pass their fingers over embossed dots and “decode” the corresponding letters or symbols. Blind people around the world still use the braille system today. The braille method has been adapted to most languages as well as math, music and even computer programming.

Louis Braille was born the son of a harness and saddle maker in France in 1809. At the age of three, he was playing in his father’s workshop and accidentally stabbed himself in the left eye with an awl. Subsequent infection and complications resulted in his losing vision in both eyes by the time he was four.

Unfortunately, few services existed for blind people at the time. Blind people were often treated as though their disability were mental rather than physical. Many blind people were forced to beg or depend on charity in order to survive.

Louis’ parents and the local priest recognized that Louis was a bright child and set about trying to obtain an education for him. At first Louis attended the local school and simply tried to absorb the material from hearing what went on in class.

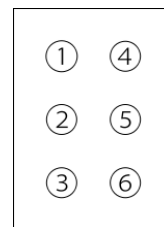
At age ten, Louis won a scholarship to one of the first blind specialty schools in the world, the *Institution Royale des Jeunes Aveugles* (Royal Institution for Blind Youth) in Paris.

Conditions at the school were harsh, but Louis showed a strong determination to learn. A gifted student, he continued to make good progress. At the school, Louis became an accomplished cellist and organist. He played both instruments throughout France.

Louis' greatest accomplishment, however, lay not in his music, but in his refusal to accept the limitations generally placed on blind people. No effective method of reading and writing existed at the time for those who could not see. Certain raised systems were in use, but they were difficult and cumbersome.

In 1821, a military officer named Charles Barbier visited the school and shared his system of "night writing." This was a raised dot system that allowed soldiers to communicate silently in the dark. Although this system was difficult and cumbersome, Louis was inspired. He spent the next three years inventing his own system of reading and writing, which he completed in 1824 at the age of fifteen.

The braille method is built on cells of six dots. Any or all of the dots can be raised. The configuration of raised dots represents a written symbol. Louis also adapted the system to math and music notation. Advanced users of braille depend on an extensive system of contractions to make rapid reading possible. An accomplished braille reader attains nearly the speed of a sighted reader.



At the age of seventeen, Louis graduated from the institute and became an assistant teacher. At nineteen, he accepted a full-time teaching position. Although he shared his method with the students, it was officially banned at the school during his lifetime.

Louis Braille died in Paris of tuberculosis in 1852 at the age of 43. He had not yet achieved fame, and not one Parisian newspaper mentioned his death.

Braille's invention was adopted by the school shortly after his death. It was finally officially recognized in France two years later, in 1854. Eventually, Louis Braille's embossed six-dot cells made their way to worldwide acceptance. Blind people use the system today to read texts, clocks, wristwatches, thermometers, sheet music, computers, ATM machines, and even elevator buttons.

On the hundredth anniversary of his death, Louis Braille's body was moved to the Pantheon in Paris, along with other French national heroes.

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS ABOUT *LOUIS BRAILLE*

1. Louis Braille was the first person to invent an embossed system for the blind.
 - a. true
 - b. false

2. Circle the word most closely related to *tactile*.
 - a. cheap
 - b. raised
 - c. touch
 - d. sensory

3. Circle the word most closely related to *embossed*.
 - a. felt
 - b. dense
 - c. touched
 - d. raised

4. Louis' father was a famous musician who played cello and organ.
 - a. true
 - b. false

5. Louis' father and the village priest worked very hard to raise enough money to send Louis to the special school.
 - a. true
 - b. false

6. Louis attended a special school in _____
 - a. Paris
 - b. Marseille
 - c. London
 - d. Coupvray

7. Louis invented the braille method:
 - a. before his sixteenth birthday
 - b. in a three-week period
 - c. hoping to make a lot of money
 - d. to make life better for other deaf children

8. Before his death, Louis Braille enjoyed worldwide fame for his invention.
 - a. true
 - b. false

9. He is buried at
 - a. Père la Chaise Cemetary
 - b. Arlington National Cemetary
 - c. Versailles
 - d. the Pantheon in Paris

Use complete sentences to answer the questions below.

1. Describe an experience or situation in your life that is similar to Louis Braille being inspired to devise a writing system by hearing about “night writing”.

2. From the way it is used in the article what do you think is the meaning of *tactile*?

3. What do you believe was the result of Braille devising a way for the blind to read and write?

4. Imagine yourself as Louis Braille, trying to convince his teachers to use his writing system, which his school has banned. Describe what you would do.

5. What do you understand differently after reading about Louis Braille? How will you use this information in the future?

ANSWERS TO *LOUIS BRAILLE*

Multiple-choice

1. b
2. c
3. d
4. b
5. b
6. a
7. a
8. a
9. b
10. d

Short-answer

1. (Answers may vary, accept reasonable answers.)
2. *Tactile* = related to the sense of touch
3. (Answers may vary, accept reasonable answers.)
4. (Answers may vary, accept reasonable answers.)
5. (Answers may vary, accept reasonable answers.)