



Braille v technology - is Braille still needed?

Technology is advancing quicker than ever. This includes many innovative aids for blind and visually impaired people, such as smartphones that speak, and screen readers for computers. But, despite all this new technology, Braille is still vital for many reasons

1) Literacy

If you are 'literate' it means you can both read and write, and Braille is a crucial tool to enable blind people to become literate. Literacy plays an essential role in both education and working life. If you just listen to words and don't read them then you won't know how they are spelt, and this in turn can cause problems in learning how to write. You would also miss out on punctuation, basic grammar and sentence structures, all of which can be learnt through using Braille.

2) Learning

Reading is important for both retention and comprehension of information. Therefore, for long and/or complicated material, most people learn far better if they read, rather than listen. Plus, there is always the threat of batteries running out or a device breaking!

3) Working

Studies have shown that blind or partially sighted people who use Braille are more likely to be in employment than those that don't, because they tend to be more literate. Plus, at work, reading and writing Braille is an invaluable skill allowing equality and accessibility of information e.g.:

- a "soft braille" display can be linked to a computer to enable a Braille user to read what is on the screen;
- Braille can help employees with things such as prompt cards for a speech/presentation;
- Braille can be used by the organisation/colleagues for paperwork like HR documents, training, and payslips;
- Braille would be more suitable than audio in a meeting/conference, for example, where background noise and ongoing discussions would make audio impractical to use.

4) Labelling

There has been a big increase in Braille in the public domain e.g. on food and drink packaging, pharmaceutical bottles/boxes, and cleaning products; plus, on lift buttons, toilet doors and ATM machines to name just a few. Braille in these places is much more practical than an audio label would be.

Braille readers also add labels to items, to help in their day-to-day lives. For example, they might add labels to clothes, CDs, domestic appliances such as washing machines to indicate the different settings, and to tins of food (you wouldn't want to open a tin of tomatoes when you want chickpeas for example!)

5) Independence and privacy

In addition to the above, Braille readers can, for example, be more financially independent through letters and statements in Braille from banks, credit card companies, utility/phone providers and other businesses. There are situations such as these where an audio option would not be suitable for reasons of privacy.

6) The enjoyment of reading

Braille books are extremely bulky, and it is much slower to read Braille than print, but reading a book is a very different experience to listening to an audio book and some people just prefer it.

Also, there are quite a lot of books that have both Braille and print in, and these allow Blind parents/carers to read to - and with - their sighted children or vice versa.

7) Games!

Cards, Bingo, Uno, Scrabble - games incorporating Braille mean visually impaired people can join in with family or friends.

8) Eating out

Braille menus allow visually impaired people to peruse the menu and relax like everyone else.

9) Memories

Many of us keep cards and letters from friends and family; they can be lovely to return to in the future, and provide many memories. Braille cards and letters are just the same. Also, Braille lets blind people freely express their thoughts on paper, for example to record ideas and feelings in a journal or memoir.

Technology is making visually impaired people's lives easier in many ways, but Braille still holds an extremely valuable place in day-to-day life and is still often the best way for people to get information. It seems, if Braille were to be lost, blind people would almost certainly be excluded from some areas of life, and be more limited in their work and social options.