

Louis Braille

by Noah Remnick



Have you ever noticed when you step into an elevator that next to the buttons showing the floor numbers, there are small plates with a series of raised dots and bumps? Did you ever wonder what those bumps and dots mean and why they are there? When you run your fingers over those plates, you feel the ridges. When blind people touch them, they read the floor numbers. In a grid of six bumps, with two across and three down, a configuration of two raised bumps across the top and one down on the right side is the number 4; one dot on the top left side and two across the middle is the number 8.

Who invented this elaborate setup of bumps and dots that comprise an entire alphabet and numerical system that allows blind people to read with their fingers? Was it a distinguished scientist, or a brilliant author, or perhaps a famous artist?

Actually, this system, which is called braille, was created by a blind 12-year-old French boy and was named for him. Louis was not always blind. He became blind by accident. Louis Braille was born on January 4, 1809 in a small country village near Paris called Coupvray. His father was a leather worker who made harnesses and other leather goods. One day, when he was just three years old, Louis was in his father's leather workshop. Like many young children, Louis enjoyed imitating his father. He was

fiddling with an awl, a small tool with a round wooden handle and a sharp, pointed metal tip that is used to punch holes in leather. While he was playing, the awl slipped and poked Louis in the eye. A doctor treated the wound as best he could and patched the eye. But the eye became infected, and the infection spread to the other eye. Within a short time, young Louis was totally blind in both eyes.

In those days, many blind people became beggars or performers in sideshows. But Louis's parents refused to allow their son's disability to get in the way of his studies or his life. Louis attended school like his brothers and sisters, relying on his creativity, intelligence, and drive to overcome obstacles. To help him navigate the village, his father made him canes. The local priest taught him to use his other senses to learn: his hearing to distinguish the calls of different birds, and his sense of smell to identify different plants and flowers. Louis was one of the brightest students in his school.

In 1819, at age 10, Louis earned a scholarship to attend the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris, the first school in the world devoted to blind children. For Louis, going to the school meant leaving his family and the village he knew well, where he felt safe. But Louis and his family knew the school offered him the best opportunity to get an education and lead a successful life. There he excelled in studying history, math, science, and grammar, but he proved especially gifted at music. Louis became an accomplished pianist and organist. He even got a paid job as an organist, playing in a small church near the institute.

The students at the school learned most of their subjects by listening to lessons. But there were a few books that the school's founder, a man named Valentin Hauy, had developed by printed raised, or embossed, letters. Reading that way was slow, and the books were large and heavy. But they were the only books available then for blind people. Louis Braille began to wonder: wasn't there a better way to allow blind people to read?

One day Louis learned about the work of a former French army captain named Charles Barbier. Captain Barbier had invented something called "night writing," a code of 12 raised dots and dashes that allowed soldiers to communicate with one another at night without using lights that would alert the enemy to their location. The soldiers could "feel" the messages with their fingers, and keep safe. The code turned out to be too complex for the soldiers, but it inspired Louis Braille. Louis simplified the system, reduced the series of dots from twelve to six and eliminated the dashes. By the time he was 20, Louis published his first alphabet for the blind, a system he continued to work on and perfect.

And how did Louis create the dots he used in his revolutionary new system? He used an awl. The very tool that caused his blindness became the instrument that brought the opportunity for reading to Louis and generations of blind people to this day.

The world was slow to accept Louis Braille's innovation. Indeed, during his lifetime, his method was not widely accepted. Louis Braille died at the young age of 43 from tuberculosis, a devastating respiratory disease. He was buried in his home village of Coupvray.

In time, Braille's method became accepted around the world. "Braille" alphabets were created in languages spanning the globe. Today, we find them not only on elevator plates, but also on computers and cell phones. And the name Louis Braille stands for innovation, courage, and determination.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What did Louis Braille invent?

- A. "night writing," a code that allows soldiers to communicate in the dark
- B. the modern piano and the organ
- C. the awl, a tool that is used to punch holes in leather
- D. an alphabet that allows blind people to read with their fingers

2. What does the author describe in the passage?

- A. the founding of the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris
- B. how Louis Braille overcame the challenges posed by his blindness
- C. the history of blind people in France
- D. how Valentin Haüy created the first book for the blind

3. Louis Braille did not let his blindness hold him back in life. What evidence from the text supports this statement?

- A. "For Louis, going to the school meant leaving his family and the village he knew well, where he felt safe."
- B. "To help him navigate the village, his father made him canes."
- C. "Louis became an accomplished pianist and organist. He even got a paid job as an organist, playing in a small church near the institute."
- D. "Louis Braille died at the young age of 43 from tuberculosis, a devastating respiratory disease."

4. Based on the passage, what might be one reason that Louis proved to be a gifted musician?

- A. Priests trained him to sing as a boy.
- B. He inherited musical talent from his father, who was also a musician.
- C. The Royal Institute for Blind Youth is a strong music school.
- D. He had to rely on his hearing after going blind.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A. the invention of braille
- B. the use of the awl in leatherworking
- C. the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris
- D. Captain Barbier and "night writing"

6. Read the following sentence: "Who invented this **elaborate** setup of bumps and dots that comprise an entire alphabet and numerical system that allows blind people to read with their fingers?"

What does "**elaborate**" mean?

- A. simple
- B. decorated
- C. complicated
- D. educated

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____, Louis Braille's alphabet for the blind was not widely accepted, but today braille is used around the world.

- A. Even though
- B. Initially
- C. As a result
- D. Certainly

8. How did Louis Braille go blind?

9. The books developed by Valentin Haüy were problematic. They were large and _____

heavy, and reading them was a slow process. What was Louis Braille's response to the problems with these books?

10. An awl both helped and hurt Louis Braille. Explain this statement using evidence from the passage.
