

# Learning Braille as a Mature Adult

by Mike Jolls

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**From the Editor: Mike Jolls has been a student at the adult training center at the Nebraska Commission for the Blind. As you will see, he clearly benefited from the training he received while a student there. This is his story:**

I've learned at least three things in my life: not to judge a book by its cover, to give things an honest chance before making a decision, and to remember that nothing worth doing or having comes without hard work and perseverance. Internalizing those ideas has helped me to grow, learn new things, and expand my knowledge and ability to cope with life. Without them I would not be here to tell you about my experience learning Braille.

I'll start by encouraging everyone who struggles to continue reading print as an adult to learn Braille. Some of you may only be starting to consider Braille. Some may actually be learning it and getting frustrated. Still others may be clinging to print reading even though it's a real struggle because you refuse to touch Braille with a ten-foot pole. When I began learning Braille, I was a bit skeptical, but I'm here to tell you that Braille works. When reading print is a struggle because you can't see it easily, Braille is the way to regain your independence. I know, because that's exactly what I have done.

I want you to know how I came to learn Braille and how much it has benefited me. I hope my story will encourage you to learn it also. I truly believe that if you'll take the time to learn it, you'll see benefits that you never thought possible.

With such a positive introduction, you may be surprised to learn that I wasn't so enthusiastic when faced with the prospect of learning Braille as an older adult. In fact I was hesitant and did what I could to hold onto reading print. This resistance was a result of attitudes learned over many years from many people. My mother was the first person I learned them from. Although I was born legally blind and couldn't do (or had difficulty doing) quite a few of the things that normal children take for granted, my mother insisted that I function in the sighted world using sighted methods. If I had difficulty using those skills, as I often did, her reply was, "Do your best; what else can you do?" She always said, "You want to look normal, and you don't want to be perceived as blind." Yet what was I? I could not see like normally sighted children? I was extremely nearsighted, which put limitations on what I could do. I wasn't totally blind, but I also couldn't compete on the same playing field as normally sighted children. What I carried away of this experience was that, in order to be accepted by normally sighted people, you had to use their methods. In my case this meant reading print.

If you took my mother's attitude to its logical conclusion, using Braille would automatically label you as blind, which would result in people treating you like a second class citizen. Many years later I asked her why she had been so adamant about avoiding the use of blindness skills. Her response was simple, "I wanted to train you to do things normally so that people wouldn't treat you differently, like a blind person; feel sorry for you; or exclude you from things. People can be cruel, and I didn't want them to label you and treat you differently." One thing that's ironic about all of this is that my mother also said, "Do things the easy way. Why make it hard on yourself by doing things the hard way?" But by instilling the avoidance of blindness skills like Braille in me, she ultimately made it harder for me to keep up with my sighted peers.

A byproduct of my training was that I was proud that I could read print and that I didn't have to use Braille, a skill that only totally blind people use. After all, I had vision. Therefore the thought never crossed my mind that learning Braille might help me. Braille was for totally blind people, not for people who had sight and could read print. Why did I need Braille? I could read print. It didn't matter that for me personally reading print was difficult and slow or that choosing to read print might ultimately affect my performance in school or on the job. Rather it was a simple decision. I could read print, and subconsciously I was proud that I didn't have to read Braille. If you could see at all, no matter how poorly, print was the method you learned. Unfortunately, although I wasn't aware of it, that prejudice meant that I was always behind everyone else in school and in my professional career. In high school I couldn't read as fast as the other students.

In college I had to withdraw from a short story literature course because I couldn't keep up. But my professional career suffered the most. People were always moving ahead of me, and I couldn't understand why because I did a good job and produced quality work. I had been on the job for twenty years before I finally found out how much slower I was than normally sighted print readers.

I timed one of my children reading a book. I was horrified when I found out that I was 85 percent slower. I could get only one-sixth as much read in the same time as my child. I immediately recognized the impact on my personal life and career that choosing to continue using print to acquire information was having.

Another thing that insisting on using insufficient vision had taught me was that the solution to my problems was to seek out an eye doctor who would prescribe a strong enough pair of glasses to allow me to see and function like other people. For a short time in my midthirties I began to see a specialist who did help me. But even with the glasses that were prescribed, reading print was still slow. While the glasses with very strong magnification allowed me to read small print once again, they only made things larger. They didn't correct the physical problem so that I could read print faster. Yet I thought I was seeking the correct solution because visual problems required visual solutions. This conditioning over the years meant that learning Braille never occurred to me.

You would have thought that as a computer software designer who solves problems every day at work I would have been seeking a solution. In fact, ever since I had discovered how much slower my reading was, I had been hunting for a solution that would help me be more competitive at work. However, with all the attitudes I have already mentioned, the solutions I sought were always ones that made the print larger. It took me many years to finally realize that, if I couldn't improve the poor vision that was holding me back, I might have to seek a solution that eliminated it. Eventually when I passed my forty-sixth birthday, it was my mother who suggested that I learn Braille. She had noticed that, as the years progressed, I was having more difficulty reading print, and that my glasses kept getting stronger and stronger. Finally one day she suggested that perhaps I should explore Braille, just in case things got to the point where I couldn't read print at all.

I didn't do anything with her suggestion at first, but I realized that the methods I was using weren't working. Eventually things got to the point where I couldn't read a newspaper with my unassisted vision. Moreover, I couldn't read technical material at work without using a machine to magnify the print. I was also having problems reading the computer monitor at work. After a while the text on the screen just seemed to wash out. At home my wife was having to read things to me. As I passed my forty-eighth birthday I realized that I was for all practical purposes illiterate. That is, I could no longer read what I needed to.

As a college graduate I didn't like being helpless and illiterate. I needed something that would give me back my independence, so I sought help from the Nebraska Commission for the Blind to explore learning Braille. You would have thought that, with all the problems I had encountered, I would have eagerly embraced Braille when I began my instruction. However, I was not completely convinced that this method of reading and writing would be useful. I suppose that I was still holding onto the past. However, I had enough experience to know that, if I was going to determine whether Braille was useful, I had to give it an honest effort. I recognized that in some ways learning Braille would be like learning a new language. Like any new subject in school, getting acclimated to the subject material takes time and attention, and that means daily practice.

Therefore, despite my preconceived ideas and attitudes, I decided that I was going to devote myself fully to the task of learning this new code. I began studying it and applied myself as I had done when I went back to school many years before. This meant studying every single night, even if only for a half hour. It meant learning how to feel the dots, get used to the patterns, and write all over again using a new method.

It wasn't until after I had finished the course, some ten months after I began, that I started to see the benefits of learning Braille. Throughout the course my counselor at the Nebraska Commission for the Blind praised me for my work. Jane Lansaw was my counselor, and she told me that most older adults fight Braille, and many take three times longer to learn it, assuming they ever do. She told me that most get discouraged or don't spend enough time practicing or simply try to hang onto the world of print they've known their entire lives. They never find any relief from the problems they face. She told me that I had made spectacular progress and that it was unbelievable that I had completed the course in

ten months. This was somewhat motivating, but the real payoff was when I completed the course and began using Braille in my daily life.

The first place I noticed benefits from knowing Braille occurred when I started reading a novel. At first this was slow and frustrating, but I found two big benefits. I didn't have to depend on my wife to read to me. Granted, at first it took me twenty-five minutes to read a Braille page, but it was better than not being able to read at all. The people at the Nebraska Commission told me things would improve if I kept it up, so I did. The other benefit was that I could read to my wife, and the unexpected benefit was that we found something that we liked to do together. As I write this, I have been reading Braille for two years, and I'm on my fourth Braille novel. Not too many days go by that we don't sit down to read together. And my reading speed? Well, I remember when my reading time suddenly dropped from twenty-five minutes a page to ten, and then again from ten minutes to five. I suppose the old adage of "practice makes perfect" is true.

Another benefit was that I could read without worrying about the lighting. In fact, I could read in the dark. This really came in handy once when I was traveling on business. I had to fly from California to Omaha, Nebraska, with a connection in Dallas, Texas. Because of bad weather I was stranded in the Dallas airport overnight. It wasn't pleasant, and I was awake all night with nothing to do. Luckily, I had brought my Braille novel along, and to pass the time I read all night long with the lights turned off. I can't tell you how thankful I was that I had a skill that allowed me to read regardless of the lighting conditions.

A third benefit was an improvement in reading things at work. After I had learned to read Braille, I approached my employer about purchasing a system that provided the contents of the computer screen on a Braille display. At first I was a bit reluctant to raise this question with my employer since the device cost \$6,000, but it is now obvious that it's easier to read the Braille than it is to read the text on my computer monitor. Although I have a very large monitor hooked up to my computer, more and more often I use the Braille device to read or edit text and don't even look at it. I remember, the first few times I used it I was totally amazed that it was possible to do this without looking at the monitor. The only real difference is that I think I use my memory a bit more to recall what I have read (rather than glancing back at it) so that I know what changes I want to make. But who would argue with having a better memory? At this point I'm just as fast reading the Braille display as I ever was reading the print one, and reading Braille causes no eyestrain. I hope that, as with pleasure reading, using Braille at work daily and in my home life will just improve my speed and that I'll see even more benefits.

The last two benefits I'll discuss came as a result of learning to write Braille using a slate and stylus, but they didn't become apparent until much later than the reading advantages. In fact, at first I wasn't convinced of the usefulness of writing Braille with the slate and stylus because I had learned to write with a pen and paper by placing them underneath a closed circuit television (CCTV). I assumed that, since I had developed this skill, I didn't have any practical use for the slate and stylus.

The fourth benefit came when my CCTV at work failed. As I was learning Braille, my instructor told me that the slate and stylus is the blind person's pen and paper. When I asked her why it was so useful if you could use a CCTV to write print, she replied that eventually technology fails, and you need a backup. One day her words came true. Things I had written the previous day large enough to be read under the CCTV were simply not large enough. I could see that print was there, but I couldn't read it with my naked eye. I remember thinking to myself, "Good grief! You really are blind." The machine would eventually be out of commission for about four days, and I had to survive on the job in the meantime. So I thought, "What the heck," and got out the slate and stylus I carried with me. I was amazed that I could even still use the skill since I hadn't used it regularly for quite some time. I was shocked to discover that it was actually easier to read my notes from the Braille page than putting a printed page under the machine and using my vision, and I didn't experience the eyestrain and fatigue I put up with when reading print.

The fifth benefit occurred a couple of days after this and before the CCTV was fixed. I had to attend a meeting, and I wanted to share some ideas with our team. I knew that lighting in the conference room was a real issue and that, if it wasn't right, I'd have a difficult time reading my print notes. Therefore I composed my notes using my slate and stylus and prayed that my ability to use this skill wasn't so stale that I wouldn't be able to read the Braille when it came time to present my ideas. As I had feared, one of the lights was out in the conference room, so the lighting was bad enough that

I wouldn't have been able to read anything written with pen and paper. But that didn't matter. I got the Braille notes out and proceeded to read them back. I think my coworkers were as amazed as I was. I had somehow remembered how to write using my slate and stylus, and the Braille was perfect. I was able to read my notes confidently and share my ideas. I didn't have to hold the piece of paper two inches from my face, and I also wasn't dependent on the CCTV, which I couldn't take with me everywhere I went. I just sat there and read my notes while looking at my colleagues and discussing the ideas. As I did that, I realized how much superior this was, and how much more normal (according to my mother) this looked. Moreover, it gave me the freedom to produce the Braille so that I could read it anywhere. And, finally, it was much easier than reading print.

After I had these last two experiences, I said to myself, "I guess I give up. No sense in fighting it when I see these benefits. Reading and writing Braille really is superior not only for the totally blind person, but also for the visually impaired one." As I said at the beginning, I encourage you who are having difficulty reading print to explore and learn Braille. If you know there's no correcting your vision, I'd highly recommend learning this skill. It will take a few years to completely integrate it and make it automatic, but I think you'll see the same benefits as I have and in the end wonder why you didn't do it years ago.