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Advantages of Uncontracted Braille

By Ann Adkins, Education Specialist, TSBVI Visually Impaired Outreach

Abstract: This article describes the advantages of teaching and using uncontracted Braille to meet the literacy needs of visually impaired students.

Key Words: programming, literacy, reading, Braille, uncontracted Braille, contracted Braille, Grade One Braille, Grade Two Braille, alphabetic Braille

In an effort to meet the needs of all visually impaired students, teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs) must explore all forms of literacy and be able to teach them to their students. In the "News and Views" section of this edition of *SEE/HEAR*, Phil Hatlen encourages us to expand our definitions of literacy to include a variety of types of literacy, including print literacy, Braille literacy, tactile literacy, auditory literacy, and media literacy. In our ongoing look at literacy, we encourage teachers, students, and parents to consider all options, including a combination of approaches to literacy. In this article, we would like to examine the use of uncontracted Braille (also called Grade One Braille or alphabetic Braille).

For tactual learners, literacy should not be limited to the use of contracted (or Grade Two) Braille. In the past, many TVIs in Texas have emphasized the use of contracted Braille and, for some, Braille literacy has even been defined as the ability to read and write in Grade Two Braille. This may have been because most instructional materials used contracted Braille (such as the Patterns program from the American Printing House for the Blind) and because most Braille books were printed in contracted form. Other reasons for emphasizing the use of contracted Braille were discussed in a previous *SEE/HEAR* article, "[Reading for Everyone: Expanding Literacy Options](#)" by Cyral Miller and Ann Rash (Summer 2001), which described the results of a survey of VI professionals. The primary use of uncontracted Braille seems to have been with students who had learning problems or additional disabilities, and the results of the survey showed that uncontracted Braille can "increase literacy options for visually impaired students with multiple disabilities." (Miller and Rash, 2001). One common belief seemed to be that uncontracted Braille was a good method only for students who were not able to master the contractions of Grade Two Braille. In the list below, we encourage you to consider why other students might benefit from uncontracted Braille as well.

1. Uncontracted Braille can provide increased opportunities for literacy. Miller and Rash (2001) describe its use by a variety of VI professionals to expand literacy options for all tactual learners.
2. Uncontracted Braille works well with phonics-based reading programs, which are found in many elementary classrooms. Uncontracted Braille provides 1-to-1 correspondence and promotes letter/sound associations, important components of literacy instruction. The use of contractions does not reinforce basic phonics skills.
3. When students use uncontracted Braille, they can participate in reading lessons with their sighted classmates. They can use the same reading materials as their peers, only in a Braille format.
4. Teaching materials are now available to teach uncontracted Braille, such as [*Un's the One: Uncontracted Braille FUNdamentals*](#), from TSBVI, and [*One is Fun*](#), by Marjorie Troughton. A greater variety of books are now available in uncontracted form (see www.braillebookshare.com), and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is currently working to provide textbooks and assessments in uncontracted Braille. These changes help alleviate the concerns of many TVIs about having adequate materials and curricula to support instruction in uncontracted Braille.
5. Because there is a letter-to-letter correspondence between uncontracted Braille and print, it is easier for sighted peers, parents, siblings, and teachers to learn to read uncontracted letters. Everyone in a Braille reader's life can be a participant in his literacy.
6. Uncontracted Braille allows for immediate feedback from a classroom teacher. She doesn't have to wait for the VI teacher to transcribe Braille once she learns the basic letters or consults a cheat sheet.
7. Because the rules of spelling are the same in uncontracted Braille and print, students can sound out and spell words at the same time and in the same way as their classmates.
8. 39 of the 50 most common words in English have contractions when written in Grade Two Braille. Many also include lower cell signs. According to *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists* (Prentice Hall, Fourth Edition, 2000), these words make up about one third of all printed material and are the words elementary teachers emphasize to their students as "instant words." Examples include many common words such as the, and, of, from, for, and it and lower cell words such as be, to, in, was, were, and his. Common suffixes also appear in early reading and involve the use of Braille contractions, such as -ing, -ed, -er, -est. The use of contractions in these early words makes reading more difficult for beginning Braille readers.
9. There are 180 rules to learn in uncontracted Braille compared to 450 rules for contracted Braille.
10. Uncontracted Braille can promote greater speed and fluency in reading (Troughton, 1992. Miller and Rash, 2001).
11. Uncontracted Braille can promote more interaction with peers. Sally Mangold reported in the *Braille Monitor* (October 2000) that Minnesota

students showed greater interaction and participation with sighted students, both academically and socially. Marjorie Troughton's research also showed greater peer interaction when students used uncontracted Braille.

12. The Minnesota teachers (Mangold, 2000) and the teachers involved in Troughton's study also reported higher academic achievement scores, in both reading rate and accuracy, with uncontracted Braille than with contracted Braille.
13. In *One is Fun*, Troughton described how motivation and interest in reading improves with the use of uncontracted Braille. Although difficult to measure, teachers in her study noted that it encouraged thinking rather than memorization, allowed their students to help their sighted classmates, and was "great fun." Miller and Rash also cite *Instructional Strategies for Braille Literacy* (AFB, Wormsley and D'Andrea, 1997), which showed that uncontracted Braille can promote self-esteem.
14. Uncontracted Braille facilitates a quick transition from print to Braille for adults and adventitiously blind students (Mangold, 2000). Uncontracted Braille offers early successes with the mechanical challenges of Braille reading (Miller and Rash, 2001), and these successes can be easily recognized and supported.
15. Uncontracted Braille can be a successful approach to reading for students who later transition to the use of contracted Braille (Miller and Rash, 2001).
16. Fewer reversal errors have been reported when using uncontracted Braille, especially for those students who use uncontracted Braille for a longer period of time before they transition to contracted Braille (Troughton, 1992).
17. Uncontracted Braille works well with a linguistic approach to reading.
18. Uncontracted Braille works well with ESL students and foreign languages.
19. Uncontracted Braille works well for students using dual media for literacy, such as those students who use print but need Braille as well.
20. Uncontracted Braille can work well with deafblind students because finger-spelling does not correlate with Braille contractions.
21. Because it matches print letter for letter, students can use uncontracted Braille in a variety of board games (Monopoly, Scrabble), card games (Uno), and leisure activities with sighted friends and family members.
22. Troughton found that because it is easier to write in uncontracted Braille, children can write their own compositions sooner and can write more independently.
23. Marjorie Troughton found that books written in contracted Braille do NOT take up significantly less space than the same books written in uncontracted Braille. Research presented at the CEC National Convention in 1999 showed that contracted Braille only saved 20% (Ross, Scheira, & Urick).
24. Uncontracted Braille can make production of Braille materials easier and helps with computer-assisted Braille (Troughton).

Many of the ideas in this article were generated as part of a Braille Study Group to improve the Braille and literacy skills of visually impaired students in Texas. We hope that you will discover other advantages as you explore the uses of uncontracted Braille, and we encourage VI teachers, students, and parents to examine all literacy options. We also encourage you to contact the VI Outreach team with information about your experiences with uncontracted Braille (Ann Adkins at 512-206-9301 or annadkins@tsbvi.edu) . Ann Rash, Education Specialist with TSBVI Visually Impaired Outreach, is currently collecting data on the use of uncontracted Braille in Texas and invites those who are interested in trying uncontracted Braille to contact her (at 512-206-9269 or annrash@tsbvi.edu) to participate in the collection of this data.

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