# Notetaking: Making Notes for Others

Presented by Matthew Horspool for the Braillists Foundation, Tuesday 23 February 2021 at 7:30 PM

## Scenario

You are the only blind person in a team and are the designated notetaker. Your notes need to make sense to you whilst also being visually appealing to your sighted colleagues. You feel most comfortable writing your notes in braille, but you only have a braille device with a very basic, text-only notetaker.

## Key Concepts

### Braille and Print Users Read Differently

This may sound obvious: a braille reader can only take in information under one or two fingers. Therefore, the act of reading involves either very straightforward left-to-right, top-to-bottom motions, or targeted exploration. For example, a braille reader may choose to carefully draw a finger from top to bottom down the left hand side of a page in order to find the starts of new paragraphs. A more adventurous braille reader may choose to draw several fingers in the same motion so as to be able to identify not only paragraphs, but also blank lines which may demarcate a heading.

Paragraphs and headings are about the only obvious things which can easily be discerned at speed by a braille reader whilst maintaining efficiency of space. Furthermore, typographical devices such as bold, italics, underlining, changes of font or size, or even capitalisation have little to no impact except, perhaps, to add clutter!

Print users, on the other hand, take in an overview of the page in one glance, and can then effectively "zoom in" on the particular section that interests them. The typographical devices mentioned above therefore become much more important. It is also immensely helpful to demarcate more than just headings and paragraphs: for example, lists are often easily distinguishable in print by means of a different method of indentation.

Furthermore, since print is significantly smaller than braille, efficiency of space is not nearly so paramount in a print context. White space is consequently often used much more liberally in print documents, and sighted people often report being put off by large blocks of dense text.

Conforming to visual principals, and ensuring that basic spelling and grammar (particularly capitalisation) is maintained, is essential in ensuring that print users can easily understand your documents. When done well, you may find that you are told that your documents look "professional".

### Use Italics for Verbal Emphasis and Titles

Consider the question: "Where are your keys?" Two connotations could be inferred:

* Where are your keys (as opposed to your coat)?
* Where are your keys (as opposed to my keys)?

The first connotation is the most likely to be inferred in a written context; in a spoken context, it is the most natural and hence little, if any, added emphasis is required.

If the second connotation is intended, in a spoken context, the word "your" will often be elongated, spoken more loudly, said at a higher pitch, or any combination of these. In a written context, the word "your" should be italicised in order to convey this emphasis.

The second use for italics is to set out titles. For example, when writing about the book "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone", the entire title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* should be italicised. Similarly, when writing minutes, any references to policies, governing documents, etc should be treated as titles and hence, for example, when referring to the "Braillists Foundation Constitution", the entire title *Braillists Foundation Constitution* should be italicised.

### Use Bold for Visual Emphasis

Sometimes, even if no emphasis would be required in a spoken context, it is helpful to add emphasis in a written context so as to draw the print user's eye to a particular part of the text. In these cases, bold should be used. Some examples include:

* The date and time of an event, in a notice about that event
* A person's name, where that person has been assigned an action: in the phrase "Matthew to email Ben", the name **Matthew** should be written in bold
* The topic, where it cannot easily be inferred from the surrounding headings: in a section about the Braillists Foundation Constitution, where the topic turns to "conflicts of interest", the phrase **conflicts of interest** should be written in bold

### Rely on Semantics for Everything Else

Word processers are generally good at styling documents based on semantic information, as long as you include that information in the first place! One such method for doing this is discussed below. In other words, for example:

* When there's a heading, style it as a heading
* When there's a list, style it as a list

As long as you do this, the word processor will know what to do to make your document look respectable, and you don't need to worry about the details of the visual appearance. If your document needs to conform to a particular corporate house style, a template for this purpose should be available from your IT or Admin department. If such a template does not exist, you may need sighted assistance to create one initially, but you should then be able to use this template for all of your documents.

## An Overview of Markdown

Markdown is a way of adding formatting information to plain text documents, such as those produced on many braille displays with a basic "scratchpad" function. The formatting information is conveyed using a combination of white space (blank lines and indentation) and special characters.

### Some Useful Elements to Get you Started

For a paragraph, insert a blank line (two new lines). Everything in markdown is a paragraph to start with, including headings and list items.

For headings, start them with hash characters (#), I.E. # for heading level 1 (a main heading), ## for heading level 2 (a subheading), ### for heading level 3 (a sub-subheading) and so on. In UEB, a hash character is brailled as dots 456 followed by the TH sign (dots 1456). Insert a space after the series of hash characters, but write the individual hash characters unspaced from each other.

For bulleted lists, treat each item as a new paragraph, and start each item with an asterisk (\*). In UEB, an asterisk is brailled as dot 5 followed by the IN sign (dots 35). Insert a space immediately after the asterisk and before the list item.

For numbered lists, simply write the number followed by a full stop. Insert a space between the number and the list item.

For italics, add a single asterisk or underscore character (\_) unspaced before the first italicised letter, and a second single asterisk or underscore character unspaced from the last italicised letter. In UEB, an underscore is brailled as dots 46 followed by a hyphen (dots 36).

For bold, add two asterisk or underscore characters (\_) unspaced before the first bolded letter, and a second set of two asterisk or underscore characters unspaced from the last bolded letter.

### Saving your Markdown Files

Markdown should be saved in plain text documents which can be opened in a basic text editor, e.g. Notepad on Windows. Many braille displays can only save in .txt format, which is perfectly sufficient.

However, for optimum compatibility, Markdown files should have a .md extension. Simply renaming a .txt file to a .md file will achieve this.

If you are working on a braille display without on-board translation, such as the Orbit Reader 20 which can only save .brf files, save the .brf file and copy it to your computer for back-translation.

## Back-Translating BRF Files Containing Markdown

You may use your preferred braille translator to do this, e.g. Duxbury, Braille Blaster, Braille 2000 and so on. In doing so, however, you should ensure that all formatting (e.g. blank lines) is retained.

If you do not have access to a braille translator, I recommend Windows users download a free tool called "Send to Braille". This tool adds two shortcuts to the "Send to" menu, available when right-clicking a file in Windows Explorer. The shortcut to use in this situation is "Back from Braille".

Send to Braille can be downloaded from: <https://tech.aph.org/lt/>

Follow the steps in the installer. Once the installer finishes, the program can be used immediately. The back-translated file will appear in the same directory as the BRF file and have the same name, but with ".txt" appended, e.g. "minutes.brf" would become "minutes.brf.txt". The original BRF file will be retained.

Send to Braille uses the LibLouis translation engine, but not necessarily the most recent version (at time of writing it uses LibLouis 3.12, but the latest version is 3.16.1). If you are feeling adventurous, you can upgrade the LibLouis engine yourself:

Download the latest version of LibLouis (if in doubt, use the -win64 version) from: <http://liblouis.org/downloads/>

Once downloaded, proceed as follows:

1. Unzip the downloaded file to a sensible location.
2. Open the "bin" folder inside the folder containing the extracted zip file, and locate the following two files:
* liblouis.dll
* lou\_translate.exe
1. Copy these files to the following location: %userprofile%\appdata\local\SendToBraille
2. In the "SendToBraille" folder, locate the folder called "tables" and delete it.
3. Open the "share" folder inside the folder containing the extracted zip file (at the same level as the "bin" folder), open the "liblouis" folder, and locate the "tables" folder.
4. Copy this "tables" folder to the "SendToBraille" folder in place of the one you deleted in step 4.

LibLouis is now up-to-date.

For further information about Send to Braille, please consult the manual located at: %userprofile%\appdata\local\SendToBraille\lt\_doc.htm

### A Note for Mac Users

A version of LibLouis for Mac is available from the download page: <http://liblouis.org/downloads/>

Whilst an equivalent of "Send to Braille" is not readily available, you may be able to use translation tools which come with LibLouis to back-translate your BRF files.

## Converting Markdown to Microsoft Word and Other Formats

Theoretically, any program which supports Markdown can be used to do this. For simplicity, I recommend Pandoc, available from: <https://www.pandoc.org/installing.html>

There are links on that page for both Windows and Mac OS. On Windows, the installation process is very simple.

To use it once installed, on Windows, proceed as follows:

1. Go to the "Run" dialog with WINDOWS+R
2. Type "cmd" and press enter
3. Type "cd" followed by a space and the path to the directory containing your markdown file, e.g. "cd documents"
4. Type "pandoc" followed by a space, the full name of the markdown file, a space, "-o", another space, and the full name of the desired Word document, e.g. "pandoc minuts.md -o minutes.docx"
5. Type "exit"

On Mac OS, you will need to complete similar steps using the "Terminal" application.

N.B. Pandoc will guess the type of file based on the file extension. It normally guesses correctly! If it doesn't, consult the Pandoc manual at: c:\program files\pandoc\Pandoc User's Guide.html

## Find Out More

There are lots of easy-to-read web pages containing more information about Markdown. I suggest typing "learn markdown" or similar into Google! However, a good starting point is here: <https://www.markdownguide.org/basic-syntax/>

## Appendix: A Worked Example

# Braillists Foundation Minutes

## Members Present

\* Dave Williams (Chair)

\* Matthew Horspool (Secretary)

\* Ben Mustill-Rose

## Braillists’ Future

Dave proposed amending the \_Braillists Foundation Constitution.\_ In particular, he wanted to add a section about \*\*conflicts of interest.\*\*

Matthew thought this was a long overdue idea.

### Conflicts of Interest

The following additional points were made:

1. The Charity Commission want us to have this policy.

2. We think it is a good idea.

The meeting closed at 7:30 PM.