THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

NOTE TAKING: CREATING NOTES FOR YOURSELF

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Welcome back. Coming up, Note Taking: Making Notes for Yourself. This session was recorded on Tuesday, 2nd March 2021 and introduced by Dave Williams.

Dave Williams: Good evening and a very warm welcome back to the Braillists Foundation Tuesday evening Braille Master Classes. Tonight our session is led by Holly Scott-Gardner and we'll be exploring the topic of making notes for yourself, so this might be during a meeting or perhaps in an education context, in a lecture or during any presentation where you want to be able to make notes, perhaps during a conversation and refer back to that information yourself at a later point.

So, we'll be getting into that very shortly. Good evening, Holly.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Hi, Dave.

Dave Williams: Just to let folks know, if you're joining us for the first time, a very warm welcome to the Braillists Foundation. The Braillists Foundation is a registered charity in the UK, dedicated to promoting the use of Braille. More Braille is simply our mantra. We do this in a number of ways, but at the moment it's largely through online training, which we do through our Braille For Beginners sessions on a Monday and our Master Classes on a Tuesday. We also have our Braille book club which takes place each Thursday evening, starting from 6pm and there's a couple of different groups with that, so if you're worried about where your Braille might be at, whether you're an intermediate or an advanced Braille reader, the book club is catering for a wider audience now on a Thursday. Then there is an open forum session on a Friday.

We also have our forum where any Braille related discussion is always very welcome. You can find out more about that at braillists.org/forum. Our equipment scheme is back up and running now, so if you're interested in availing yourself of some low-cost Braille equipment, it's usually things like slates and styluses, so hand frames for a portable low-cost way of making Braille on the move.

We are looking forward to tonight's session and our moderator this evening is Ben. Good evening to you, Ben.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good evening, Mr. Williams. How are you doing today?

Dave Williams: Yes, good. And at the appropriate time, you'll run everybody through the buttons to press and what you need to do to be heard within the call.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Definitely.

Dave Williams: As always this session is run in line with our moderation policy so our sessions are carefully moderated to make sure that everybody can hear everybody else and that we have a safe and productive experience. Don't forget that means keeping yourself on mute unless invited to do otherwise and when we get to questions, Ben will give you instructions for how to raise your hand and then you will be acknowledged and then you'll be invited to unmute and you can go ahead and ask your question.

Right, I think that's almost everybody in. I see there are a few people still arriving, but I'm going to hand it over to Holly for Braille Note Taking for Yourself.

Holly Scott-Gardner: HI, everyone, it's great to see so many of you today. I will just apologise quickly and say that my Internet is a bit flaky at the moment, so I'll just ask Ben or someone to yell if I start breaking up really badly because I won't know otherwise.

So, as Dave mentioned, I am going to talk today about Taking Notes for Yourself. So, last week Matthew led a session on Note Taking for Other People. We looked at using things like Markdown in order to take nicely formatted notes that you need to share with others.

But, today, I'm going to talk about taking those notes that are just for yourself and the contexts in which I do this are in meetings where I just want to jot down my own personal notes, not situations where I'm asked to take minutes for everyone, but maybe I'm in a work meeting and I need to take notes on a project which I'll refer to. Another great example is in university where I take a lot of notes when I'm in classes or again about projects I'm working on for presentations, things like that.

So, I'm going to look at those different settings where you might be taking notes and some ways to do it.

I will say this time I'm going to ask people to raise their hands if they have questions at any point because I think that, whereas in a couple of the sessions that I've done, I've really divided it up into quite close sections, this one is bit more general, so I would like people to be able to ask questions whenever they feel like they have one. So, I'm just going to pass over to Ben to quickly talk about how to do that.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Yes, no problem. So, depending on how you are joining us today, there are a few different ways you can raise your hands. If you're on Windows, you can press Alt+Y. If you're on a Mac, you can press Option+Y. If you're dialling in via telephone, you can press star and nine. I think we've got a couple of people on the telephone with us today. If you're on an iDevice, like an iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch, you can press the More button which is in the bottom right-hand of your screen and then press the Raise Hand button from there.

For anyone who hasn't joined any of our events before, we try to give people a bit of warning before we come to them, just in case you're listening to us while you're doing the dishes. So we'll say something like, "Okay, now we're going to Holly and then after Holly, we're going to go to Ben," so that Ben has a bit of time to get back to his computer and be ready to speak.

I think that's about all from me so I'll pass back over to Holly.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Let's start about taking very, very brief notes, so not when you're really wanting to take pages and pages but let's say you're in a meeting and you know you're going to have a to-do list when you come out of that meeting and you think, "Okay, well, I need to note down maybe four or five points and that's it."

There are a couple of ways I might approach doing that and the first way I might do it is by bringing a Braille display with me into that meeting and just having a document on that because it doesn't matter what length of document you're writing, you can take some long notes if you want to but also if you're just writing down a quick to-do list, you can do it on that.

I would recommend if possible a smaller display because what I look at in these contexts is that I don't want loads of equipment with me, so actually I don't want a computer with a Braille display or a tablet and a Braille display. I want something quite small, so if I have access to a small display, I might do that.

One thing I do when I'm wanting to take down very brief notes is make use of the slate and stylus which we also refer to as the hand frame and I do this in these kinds of note taking situations because I think it's so ideal for taking really rough, brief notes. The nice thing about these kinds of notes is that you can write whatever you want and what I mean by that, is that you're not using electronic Braille so there's no automatic translation. You can literally jot down whatever you want. So, if you have a code for reducing the size of your notes and you abbreviate words in very specific ways, so just for your own note taking, you can do that with a slate and stylus.

I'll quite often find myself with a small notebook and a slate in these situations where maybe I'm meeting with my dissertation supervisor and he's going to give me a couple of things that I need to do before our next meeting and then one or two points about what I've already done. Well, okay, I don't actually need to take a lot of equipment with me. So in those situations, I use hard copy Braille.

Another option you have for these kinds of situations and it's one that is Braille and it's not, is actually using Braille screen input which I quite often do again in these what I call brief note taking situations where I'm not wanting to take pages and pages of notes. I just want to jot down a few points and Braille screen input, if you have an iDevice, is good. We did run a session on using Braille with iOS and we talked about Braille screen input so it's worth going to have a listen or do some research online because there's lot of information about it.

You can essentially write in Braille on your iDevice and I find this quite useful because I don't really need to be listening to my screen reader so much because I'm writing in Braille and it's really that muscle memory. That's another thing that I tend to prioritise in these situations is that I don't want to be attached to a headset or anything like that. I really want a solution where my ears are open and I'm just quickly using my hands to take these notes.

So, those are the two ways I do it for what I call very brief, brief note taking, which is something I'm not going to touch on in too much detail because I think it's quite self-explanatory and the most difficult thing about note taking is when you've got to take pages and pages of them.

The big question when you're taking really long notes is, well, do I take them in hard copy or not? I tend not to. Now, there are people who can write using a slate and stylus very, very quickly. I've seen people write at an extraordinary rate and if I was asked to take notes using a hand frame, I probably could. I'd have to do a very abbreviated note taking system and then that requires you to remember your abbreviations which is always a challenge, certainly for me.

I would err on the side of caution and go towards electronic Braille for note taking situations where you're going to take a lot of notes. The reason I say that is because, although in some ways electronic Braille is less reliable, your technology can fail, it's much quicker than trying to write Braille by hand, certainly with a slate and stylus.

Now, your other option for hard copy Braille would of course be using a Perkins brailler but that isn't particularly practical for most situations. Now, if you're at home and you want to take some notes, you could absolutely use a Perkins. I wouldn't recommend bringing it into your work meetings though. It's quite a lot to carry around and not to mention the noise. So, I tend to use electronic Braille for these kinds of situations.

Again, you've got a few options. You can have your Braille display hooked up to a computer, to a tablet or phone. You can use it as a stand-alone device and that is what I would personally choose. Now, there are situations in which I think, hm, I'd better have it connected to my computer and if I'm working on more advanced documents and I'm, say, needing to handle comments and the note taking I'm doing is very much annotating a document, then, yes, I will use it connected to a computer. But, actually, what I prefer doing is taking notes separately and then if I have to put them in the document, do it that way, just because I think that only having one device is a lot easier. Also these notes are for me, they're not necessarily for anyone else to see so it doesn't matter if they're not perfect.

As to how to actually structure your notes, that really depends on you and what you're going to use them for. I tend to try to write quite clear headings in my notes, so I will write a title for each section and then a couple of blank lines. The reason I do that is because then if I'm reviewing those notes on a computer, it's actually easier to find the spaces and to find my place in those notes, whereas if I've just got one huge lump of text, it doesn't necessarily make that much difference if I'm reading line by line on a display, but certainly does when I bring it back over to a computer. So, I try be mindful of in which situations I might need to read these notes.

Now, if I'm just writing a list of basic things for me to do or I'm writing some feedback on a project or something that's never going to go anywhere other than my display, it tends to be a lot messier and I tend to write at a surprising speed and I wouldn't say my notes are particularly accurate. So, I'd say always when you're thinking to start your notes, bear in mind what the goal is for these notes. Where are you going to use them? Do you want them to be then transferred onto another device or is this staying on your Braille display?

I'm just going to check and see if anyone has any questions.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We have a hand raised and it is [PHONETIC: Pany] and I'm incredibly sorry if I've mispronounced that. Then we're going to go to Theresa.

Pany: Greetings from Greece and I'd like to apologise. Last time you called me and I didn't have the nerve, being unsure, to reply in time.

Anyway my concern is the fact that when you take notes for yourself, unless you are in your home environment at the computer where you can do copy and paste quite easily, I have found it very difficult with say conferences, etc, and I attend academic conferences quite a lot, even with the minimal noise that the Braille displays make, I have found that sighted colleagues would get annoyed, even with the little noise of the Braille display, so I was wondering what you would recommend about this. I don't think manufacturers can eliminate even this little noise. What would you have to say about that?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I've also attended quite a few conferences and I guess I have a few thoughts on that. Firstly some Braille displays are noisier than others. The Orbit is a classic example of one that's quite loud and then there are slightly quieter displays. I do think though that there's an element that you're not actually being disruptive and I don't think that Braille displays particularly are. It's not all that much louder than a roomful of sighted people typing on computers.

I think it's actually quite common these days for people to use technology and my personal feeling is that people need to get over it because if you're at a conference, it's unlikely that the sound of your display is going to drown out the speaker at that conference. They should be miced up and if they're not, your display isn't the issue there, it's conference prep. I know that sounds like a very abrupt answer but I do think you're not putting your screen reader off headphones and being really disruptive. You're literally just typing and better that than a Perkins.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Great question. We're going to come to Theresa next and then we have no more hands for now.

Theresa: I was wondering, I have a Focus, Bluetooth. For taking notes in class using a Braille display, if one takes that Braille display as a stand-alone device, just using the base battery, is it possible to use this device in taking class notes or perhaps it wouldn't last long enough?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I guess you're asking about the battery life, right?

Theresa: Yes, about battery life and the possibility of actually taking those notes with the stand-alone device in class.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, some Focus displays do, I believe, have stand-alone functions. I think the new one does. So, yes, if your display had the ability to write on it without being connected to a device, you absolutely can use that in class. I've used displays in class before, something like the Mantis which has its own stand-alone features to take notes.

In terms of battery life, again it just depends on how long your class is. My advice would always be to charge your device before class. That's what I always try and do and go in with a full battery and then it should last quite a long time and it should use less battery if Bluetooth and everything is off, so you should be fine.

Theresa: Right, and apparently with this device, you can do text files and after taking those notes, I suppose I can transfer the files to my computer and arrange them.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, you can transfer those files to your computer. If you put them on an SD card or a memory stick, depending on what connection your Braille display has, you can then put those text files on a computer.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Theresa. It's one of those things where lots of people might already own tech like that but no-one actually knows what it's capable of doing.

Dave Williams: Ben, do we have time for one more question. There's somebody called Carol Adams who's posted in the chat that she'd like to raise her hand but she's not able to do so at the moment.

Ben Mustill-Rose: So, Carol, I'll just try to unmute you.

Carol: When you said about writing stuff on your phone with a Braille display connected, in the iPhone, what would you use? Would you use Notes or something like that?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I tend to use my phone if I'm taking very, very brief notes. Then I'll refer to them or possibly put them in a calendar or a to-do list or I can then just email them to myself. Really, I use it for very brief notes and usually if I'm caught without any other devices on me.

Carol: That makes sense. Okay.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Carol.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I did see a question about previous recordings. That is entirely my fault and they will go up this evening. If you check back half an hour, 45 minutes after the event, all the previous recordings will be updated.

Ben Mustill-Rose: I think we're good to move on then.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I'm going to talk about condensing some of your notes and how I choose to handle that. This is always quite a difficult one, so do you abbreviate your notes, do you not, what are you going to remember. I think the first thing to look at is what device you're taking those notes on because if you're taking them on a device and, say, you've got your device set to contracted Braille, if you try and abbreviate certain things, it will automatically do the translation. So, it's important to think about that.

If you're taking notes in a BRF file, you can write whatever you want to and it will appear literally just as the characters you've written. One thing I tend to look at is how can I make taking these notes quicker and in some ways, because we have contracted Braille, I find that in a lot of situations, I don't need to abbreviate things any further. I can write Braille so quickly, I don't need to do that. I can write in contracted or what we call Grade 2 Braille and that is quick enough.

If you do need to, I think it's important to look at what words maybe don't have any contractions in them and they're words you use all the time, so like names or job titles which you can maybe really shorten and that's what I tend to do in these situations. I think, well, nobody needs to see my notes, nobody actually needs to understand them apart from me, and again I tend not to take full sentences, unless I feel like I really need to. So I'll just write down the very key words and the key points, but knowing that I will be able to read those back and understand what they're saying.

If possible, I try to take my notes in BRF files. I do this if I'm reading them on my display, but not if I'm wanting to transfer them to my computer, because, again, there's going to be extra steps then, in converting them to a text file and how I'm going to be handle this. So, if I'm wanting to take notes that are easily transferable or where I can just copy and paste them, I'll make sure they're in text files that I can then copy over to my computer.

It sounds like that's quite a lot to think about but it really isn't as complicated as I perhaps made it sound and most Braille displays will take notes as text files or sometimes Word documents that you can then just open directly in Microsoft Word if you transfer them onto your computer.

One thing I choose not to do when I'm taking notes and I kind of mentioned this earlier and I said sometimes I'll do it if I really have to, and that's taking notes on an existing document. So, let's say that I've got a report that I need to write down some notes about and these notes are just for me but I need to annotate a report. I don't find it that great trying to take notes on that existing document. The reason I say this is because whilst, yes, in some ways taking notes on the existing document allows you to add in all that context, it also means you've got to constantly be finding your place. So, for example, you're reading through the report and then writing notes on it. I'll only do this if I'm in a situation where I literally am reading through the entire report. For a sighted person, let's say you've got that report and you can very quickly scroll down and take some notes and then look for the headings and different things, but if you're reading that on a single line Braille display, that process is very much altered. So, unless you can do a find, which you might be able to, depending on what information you're being given, to find the location in the report, I find it becomes much more cumbersome.

So, what I tend to do is have a separate document and I'll write something like, "In the first section," or "under research methods," and then I'll note down things that can then help me link back to what I'm talking about and I try to be quite specific in my notes.

I make that decision very deliberately because I think I waste far more time searching for my place in that existing document and it's a lot easier afterwards to go and transfer those notes or make the changes from those notes, because, again, what I can do when I'm reviewing those, let's say I'm then reviewing them on a computer or even still in Braille, I can read those notes and then open another window and look down that document and then flip back to my notes. I find it easier to handle two documents than one document where I've got notes scattered through it but I've got to read through that whole document to even find my notes. It's not like I can colour-coordinate them or do it that easily.

There are arguments where you could say you can use JAWS settings, for example, to change how it handles on speech output, so you could maybe put all your notes in bold and you could in theory do that in Braille and then when you're reading it back, read it with a screen reader. I just think it's much more work. Another blind person might have a completely different opinion on that so I do think it's something worth experimenting with, to see if you prefer taking notes on the document you're referring to or if you prefer a separate document.

The next thing I'm going to talk about is taking notes on the move and I did touch on this very briefly and I want to talk about this because I think it's something that requires more forethought when you're a blind person.

If you're sighted and let's say you're walking with someone and you quickly jot down some notes, you can do it on your phone and we can argue about whether a sighted person should be looking at their phone when they're walking and possibly not, but people do it. How do you do that as a blind person? Is there a convenient way to hold your cane and take your notes and do all this stuff? I don't think there is in Braille a very convenient way at all to be walking and talking and taking notes all at once.

I would probably stop and hold a conversation and maybe take notes at the same time. There are a couple of ways you can do that. You can make use of the Braille screen input method on your phone. The convenient thing about that is you can just rest your phone on your thumbs and be quickly typing in Braille on the screen. That's what I tend to do.

Another option is a Braille display and this begs the question, how do I hold my display and take notes if I'm not at a table? This is why I try to get a Braille display with some kind of shoulder strap. I talked about this in the session I led on presenting. The reason I say this, is because it's possible to present just from a Braille display without resting it on anything, not ideal but possible, and the same can be said for note taking. It's possible to have a Braille display attached to you and be taking those notes on the go. Now, is it ideal? Absolutely not. Can you do it though? Yes, you can. So, for these situations, if you often find yourself where you very quickly have to jot down some notes, if you have your Braille display on a shoulder strap, you can turn it so it's hanging in front of you and then take those notes.

One other thing I would say about that is think about the display you have. How long does it take to turn that display on? Can you just keep your display in standby mode so that you can very quickly activate it and wake it up?

Now, if you are familiar with the days of BrailleNote Apexes which switched on pretty much immediately, that wasn't a concern but if you have something like a BrailleNote Touch, which takes a fair amount of time to start up, you probably don't want to be switching your Braille display on and off all the time and asking someone to wait while you're trying to take those notes.

So, I'm just going to head back and see if anyone has any questions again.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We've got a hand raised from Theo and we've had a question in the chat around the availability of Braillecast which is our podcast which is where we sometimes store these recordings. A question about Braillecast on Amazon's Smart Speakers so I'll just come to that quickly. We are technically available on Amazon Smart Speakers. The problem that we're finding is that Lady A doesn't understand the word "Braille" which is quite tricky when your podcast is called Braillecast. So, best way for now is to go to braillecast.com or use a podcast app that you're familiar with. We are very actively looking into ways that we can try and make that a little bit better.

So we're going to come to Theo now.

Theo: My question was about, if you're in a Word document, are there any ways to have your Braille display show the bold, italics and underline symbols in Braille because I found that JAWS or NVDA can announce it differently?

Holly Scott-Gardner: That is a good question. I'm actually going to see if Matthew is on this call because he's more of a UEB expert on the technical side than I am.

Matthew Horspool: I'm here. Just to confirm, the question was about getting JAWS and NVDA to show the UEB type form symbols?

Theo: Yes, on the Braille display which is connected, so basically in a Word document.

Matthew Horspool: I think NVDA can do this and I think JAWS can't do that and more than that I can't actually tell you at the moment.

The reason why it's historically been difficult to do it is because of look-ahead capabilities. In other words if the screen reader's got a line of text, it might close the italics because it's at the end of the line of text but then the next line of text actually is a continuation of the italics. So, because they haven't historically been able to look very far ahead, there's been problems with that. I think there might be some work being done to overcome that but I can't honestly remember where we're at in terms of that at the moment.

Theo: Yes, I see what you mean. Thank you. Do let me know if you find out how to do that on NVDA, thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Theo. We've got a couple of other hands now, so we're going to come to Debbie first and then Claudia.

Debbie: Holly, you mentioned the fact that you generally don't make additions to a document and actually I agree with you. I've done it if it's short, maybe six or seven items, I'll add bits in there. My question is, often in a meeting people will add items to the agenda. Where do you put those? The danger of putting them in a separate document is I've got to remember that they've been added and where they're going to get added. I'm inclined to do that in the agenda but, like you said, if it's item number 16 and we're only on item number three, you've got to scroll down. I wondered if you had any tips for particularly new Braille users.

I have a second question about Bluetooth lag on Braille displays, if you want to address that at some point in your comments. Thank you.

Holly Scott-Gardner: So, what I would do in that situation is probably try to make sure to start off so that my agenda was written in such a way that it is easy to find things on. So, if it had numbers, I would then put any new points on the agenda at the bottom of the document, because you can usually use a shortcut to get to the very bottom and then I would use the find function to find the number that I was on previously. As long as your items are numbered, that's quite a quick way to get back to where you were. So, I would probably do it in the same document if it was something like an agenda where I'm just going down a list.

It's definitely a difficult one. Another way you can do it is by using the display for note taking and additional stuff and maybe having a hard copy agenda. Now, that does then open up how many bits of papers and documents do you want and that depends on personal preference.

Debbie: Can you address the Bluetooth lag when you're reading in Braille or taking notes in Braille? My son's Braille display seems to have more of it than others. Or do you do a USB connection with your device to your phone, for example?

Holly Scott-Gardner: With a computer, I tend to connect by USB because it means there isn't lag in the same way. Bluetooth connections are difficult. In theory they should be getting less and less laggy. I don't know how that will impact Braille displays because I don't know much about the hardware side. I think unfortunately there isn't much we can do about this as the end user beyond telling manufacturers that faster connections are a priority.

There are more technical people on the Braillists team and they might have a different perspective on that. Unfortunately though when using a display with a phone on a Bluetooth connection, it's the same with Bluetooth headsets, there is still some lag and I don't know if there's much we can do about that.

Debbie: Thank you very much.

Matthew Horspool: I would agree with that. If you had a Braille display that supported Bluetooth 5.1 and you had a phone that supported Bluetooth 5.1, if you'll allow me to get a bit technical for a second, then theoretically that should be faster than Braille displays have been in the past. However if you have an older Braille display that doesn't support Bluetooth 5.1, then it doesn't matter how fast your phone's Bluetooth is, the Bluetooth is still going to be slow and still have lag. Similarly if you have a new Braille display that supports Bluetooth 5.1, but a phone that doesn't, you have the same problem. So, everything needs to align just so in order to have an optimum experience and quite often that doesn't happen.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Definitely be careful when you buy things based on Bluetooth numbers because looking at the different revisions of Bluetooth, they don't always do things to improve lag.

So we have a few more hands and a question in the chat. So going to come to Claudia next and then Margaret.

Claudia: You said when you're taking notes with the slate and stylus, you might have a notebook on you and to be honest, I never heard of having a notebook and the slate and stylus. Any particular size? I always imagined a slate and stylus and some little sheets of paper and I was surprised to hear that, which is a good thing. I would like to take that on and I was wondering what you would recommend.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I'm a huge fan of this. The RNIB has an address book and if you take out the alphabet cards, it's just a small ring binder with Braille cards in it and I actually find this works really well with a small four-line slate.

Claudia: I didn't think about that. I have an A4 slate and the Janus frame. Are there any in-between hand frames so, for example, the ones that would actually fit the index note book?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I don't know if there's a frame that perfectly fits it. What I use is a four-line frame, so quite a small slate, quite long but it's only got four lines and so I can actually then unclip it and slide it down the card once I've written four lines and I find that works really, really well with these note cards. That's what I use all the time with it.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Great tips there, Holly, and I like the address book. That's a great example of something that might not seem obvious at first but actually makes quite a bit of sense.

We are going to Margaret then a question from the chat.

Margaret: I'm also a big fan and ancient user of the slate and stylus but I was wondering, just out of interest, for Holly and anyone else, for people who maybe haven't grown up crashing their way through school and university doing slate stuff, the newest and most portable and possibly least ergonomic device out there now is the Orbit Writer and I know that it's meant to be very spare and I bought one but I haven't learned to use it yet and I'd be interested to hear from anyone who has. Do you think this might be a good option for non-slate users who maybe don't want to start learning?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I think the Orbit Writer has a potential to be really useful. From what I know, it is just an input device so it doesn't have Braille output on it. So there is that limitation but if you're just using it as an input device, with your phone, for example, and you're not planning on reading back in Braille what you've written, I think it could be really useful. I haven't seen one and I would really like to get my hands on one. I wonder if any of the rest of the Braillists team has seen one yet.

Ben Mustill-Rose: I don't believe so. I think they're coming out in the UK fairly shortly.

An interesting question from the chat now, talking about an ATC feature that some Braille displays have. "Is it useful in relation to taking notes? Sometimes it is, something it isn't, what are your opinions?" Now, I'm going to put my hands up here straight away and say I don't know what an ATC feature. I don't know if you have any ideas.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I don't know in this context what ATC stands for. I bet Matthew does.

Matthew Horspool: Yes, I'll come in on that one. For context, the question was asked by the Greek person whose name I can't pronounce so I do apologise but who, I believe, has a Handy Tech display or a Help Tech display and ATC in that context probably stands for Active Tactile Control, I believe, and it's a feature whereby the display auto advances but instead of auto advancing by time, it auto advances by when your hands reach the end of the display.

I can't actually speak to its usefulness taking notes but that's what it is.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes. I don't own one of those displays. I am in general a user of Humanware displays so I can't comment on how useful that feature would be. I think it's something to try out and this is what I tend to say, is there are things that I personally find useful, that other people hate and vice versa. So you need to test out if it enhances how you take notes and it's worth doing.

Dave Williams: I've spent some time with the Help Tech, formerly Handy Tech, displays and Matthew is correct, Automatic Tactile Control and we've got a couple of answers confirming this in the chat.

It's a feature whereby the position of your fingers is detected, as they read across the Braille display. So if you know the Handy Tech displays or Help Tech displays, they're the ones with the concave cells that kind of dip down in the middle and some of them can also sense where your fingers are. It's a feature that's really designed for reading, to minimise the amount of times you have to press an advance button but also to take out the crude guessing of auto advancing the display every two seconds or three seconds. I imagine it would be more of a hindrance than a help in the context of taking notes where you might be moving backwards and forwards, checking, writing, moving, that kind of thing. I think it's really more designed for if you're reading longer form passages so that you don't have to press an advance button or wait for a timer.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thank you. I appreciate that answer, it's very helpful.

Ben Mustill-Rose: No more hands for now. We're good to move on with about ten minutes to go.

Holly Scott-Gardner: So, we only have a very small amount of time left, so I'll quickly go over just a couple of things that I've touched on but just to run through everything.

The main thing I consider when I'm starting to take notes is what is the purpose of my notes. What am I taking them for? Am I taking them to transfer them back to my computer? Am I taking them to then keep on my Braille display forever? That changes maybe what document type I use.

Things to think about are, how do you make your Braille display as portable as possible, so having a shoulder strap is very useful, not least because you could just wear your display over your shoulder and you don't have to have anything else with you. Sometimes I would even go to university with just a Braille display and a phone shoved in a pocket and that was about it. Not saying that's the recommended way to do blindness but it's certainly what I've done and it works

Another thing to think about is how are you going to make your notes accessible in the sense that you don't want them to just be one huge chunk of text, especially if you're then going back to reading them with a screen reader, so putting in headings, even if they're not formatted to look any different, using line breaks. Something I think we rely on quite heavily as blind people is paragraph line breaks as well. I do this in note taking, particular if I'm taking notes on different areas, I'll make sure there's a couple of line breaks in between the different blocks that I'm writing and that's quite useful when I'm transferring them back to a PC.

How do you get notes from your phone back to the computer? My main advice is to email them to yourself. It really is the best way if you're taking notes on an iPhone. You can of course use something like Microsoft Word on the iPhone and then synch it with OneDrive or something like that. I tend not to as I don't particularly love Word on the phone. There's actually nothing strictly wrong with it, it's just if I'm taking notes on a phone, I'm really taking rudimentary notes.

I want to do a quick overview of the more basic note taking tech, so slates and styluses. I would recommend for notes either having a smaller slate and buy specific note cards for it or my personal favourite which is a four-line slate because it doesn't really matter if your note cards aren't quite as long because you can feel where the end is anyway and you can just slide your slate up and down them if you're wanting to add more lines to it. If you've written four lines already and there's still another four lines blank on your note card, you can just slide the slate down. So, that tends to be what I use is this four-line slate.

Now, I don't recommend using an A4 slate, unless you're taking a whole page of notes and you're actually putting a sheet of paper in. Otherwise you have to really keep track of the number of cells you've written and that can get quite chaotic quite quickly if you're not paying attention. I don't have a very good attention span so I don't recommend using an A4 slate for that purpose, unless you're putting in a whole piece of paper.

Now, I do sometimes use an A4 slate for note taking and then I buy these big Lever files in which to store my note paper and my notes. I wouldn't say it's the most portable solution. I personally wouldn't want to carry them around with me and I certainly wouldn't want to use them in the workplace. I've been known to do it in meetings where maybe I've jumped on a Zoom meeting on my phone and I'm at home and I think, okay, I've got to write this down and then I'll quickly pull out a slate and then write on an actual A4 sheet of paper.

Note taking at events, we did get this question earlier on about the sound and the level of noise and I would say I don't tend to worry about that, beyond let's say if I'm using an Orbit but for most displays I don't think they're any more intrusive than people typing on their laptops and fidgeting around. I've been to academic conferences and people are reasonably quiet but people are still clearing their throats and shifting and getting bottles of water out of their bags and things like that, so as a blind person if you're taking some notes, you're not going to be the most disruptive person there and I would say if the person next to you really hates you for it, in my mind, that's more on them than it is on you.

What I would say though about note taking in conference environments is think about if you can put your display on your lap or if there is a table. Now, some conferences will have you at tables and you'll be sat drinking cups of coffee. Others you're just on rows of chairs and you'll want a display that you can put on your lap. So, in that situation, I would want a Braille display with stand-alone note taking capabilities because there's nothing more irritating than trying to balance my phone and my display on my lap, or having my phone in my bag and then it's just rattling around in there and I'm thinking about the fact that the screen isn't locked because I'm using it with my display and that personally makes me nervous. So, in that situation, I would definitely want a display with stand-alone note taking capabilities and I wouldn't even think about using a computer in that environment, unless I really had to.

That's an overview of everything in a very brief way and I'll just see if anyone has any last-minute quick questions.

Ben Mustill-Rose: A question from Nick Adamson is the only hand.

Nick: I wanted to know if there are any exercises or techniques to increase Braille input. I'm quite a fast touch typist but I'm not quite so fast at typing in Braille and I would like to go to meetings and not take my laptop and just have my little voice reader thing that types in Braille.

Holly Scott-Gardner: This is actually really annoying to say but the most effective way I've found is just by doing it more and more. It's one of the things, as with most things, like touch typing, you get better by doing it more. If you don't type very often, you're going to struggle to increase your speed and Braille is very, very similar. So, just use Braille for note taking purposes when you're not under such a time crunch. It's just using it as much as you can and it comes in time. I know Braille readers hate it when I say this and it is so frustrating in the beginning. I have the advantage of spending my whole primary school life basically doing this which other people don't have but it is one of those things where you've just got to keep working at it. If you're not really comfortable in Grade 2, so contracted Braille, I would say, if you can, try and work at getting comfortable because that will obviously increase your speed for input because you're not having to type quite so much.

Matthew Horspool: What Holly says is right but as somebody who used to teach Braille in a school to children that did not want to learn Braille, one of the techniques I used to use sometimes was to put a metronome on the desk and the metronome would go tick, tock, tick, tock and I would get them to do one stroke of Braille for every tock of the metronome and then would gradually speed the metronome up and what I found was that it engaged them but also it did actually systematically improve their speed. If you got really good, you could do two strokes. That may help if you can get a metronome app and do some practice that way.

Holly Scott-Gardner: That's a great idea. I like it.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Can we squeeze one quick question in from Theresa, Holly?

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I think so.

Theresa: For quite a long time, I've been writing on a Braille computer with the 8 dot, so I have forgotten Braille Grade 2 and some of the signs related to punctuation, numbers and such things since Braille codes have been changing quite a bit since the 70s when I learned Braille. So, I was wondering if there is a website on the Internet where I could get the new Braille signs, punctuations, contractions and such.

Holly Scott-Gardner: There's a couple of things I could point you towards. If you're really wanting to have more of a course style, I would look at UEB online. If you're just wanting overview, I'm going to ask Matthew, does it matter what country you're in?

Matthew Horspool: I wouldn't say too much. Could you send us an email to help@braillists.org and we'll take that conversation offline but there's definitely some resources that you can have access to.

Ben Mustill-Rose: No more hands so it's over to Holly and Dave to finish up.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I'll just finish up very quickly and then pass on to Dave. Thanks, everyone, for attending this session and we will be back next week and we're going to start talking about more advocacy type things, so we've talked about using Braille but how do we actually get the Braille, how do we get Braille in the workplace, how do we get it in education, how do we get Braille signs in public? So, the next two weeks are going to focus on advocacy-related topics rather than Braille usage itself. That is for our current series of Master Classes. I don't mean they're ending forever but we did design a series of ten to lead on from one another so we are moving in to advocacy now, which I'm excited about and I will pass back to Dave.

Dave Williams: Rachel Usher says great tip about the metronome and she's going to give that a go. If anyone would like to continue the conversation, the Braillists forum is available, braillists.org/forum. It's a Google group, fairly low traffic. Don't forget there's also the Braille support group on Facebook where Braille-related discussion also takes place.

Thank you very much to Matthew Horspool for your expertise this evening, Ben Mustill-Rose for your help with the moderation, and of course Holly for leading and putting together tonight's and many of the other Master Class sessions. If you missed any or you would like to check out the archive in case there are any other topics that you might find of interest, you can visit our Media page, braillists.org/media or subscribe to the Braillecast podcast, obviously bearing in mind the caveat that the A lady is having difficulty understanding the word Braillecast at the moment but we're working on it.

Thanks very much, everybody, really appreciate all your contributions, interesting questions as ever and we'll be back on Thursday with book club and Friday for the forum and Monday for Beginners.

From all of us at the Braillists Foundation, have a great week and until next time, bye for now.