

The incredible story of the boy who invented Braille _ BBC Ideas

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NARRATOR: Where does Braille come from?

ON SCREEN TEXT: Eponyms. Something named after someone. Braille.

NARRATOR: The story begins in 1812 in France, and a young boy called Louis

Braille. He lost his sight in one eye when he was three. This was the

culprit, a sharp tool called an awl, which he was playing around with

in his father's workshop. His eye got infected, and the infection

spread to the other eye. By five, Louis Braille was completely blind.

But he was determined, and he went on to win a scholarship at

France's Royal Institute for Blind Youth. At the time, the system for

reading was pretty basic, just raised letters on a page. So he started

working on a new code that would be quicker and more efficient. By

the time he was 15, Braille's new system was basically complete, and

the first edition was published in 1829. Braille's system was based on

a military code called "night writing." Invented by captain Charles

Barbier, it was a system of embossed dots and dashes that soldiers could read safely with their fingers on the battlefield at night. Braille simplified the system, reducing the cells from 12 to six raised dots, so that they were the ideal size for a fingertip to feel with one touch.

Braille created his raised dots using an awl, the same sharp tool that had caused his blindness, and a flat grill to keep the lines straight and readable. It's read from left to right like other European scripts.

Braille is not a language, it's a system of writing, which means it can be adapted to different languages. Braille codes have been developed for maths and scientific formulae. Braille loved music and invented a system of Braille for writing music, too. But the medical establishment was conservative, and Braille's innovation was slow to be adopted. He died of tuberculosis, aged 43, two years before his system was finally taught at the institute where he'd been a student.

A hundred years later, he was reburied at the Pantheon in Paris, in honour of his work, though his local village insisted on keeping his hands. Over time, the system did spread throughout the French-speaking world. By 1882, it was in use across Europe, and had reached North America by 1916. A universal Braille code for English

was formalised in 1932. Braille has been revolutionary for many blind people around the world. But with the rise of new technologies, including computers that talk, literacy rates are on the decline. In 1999, a second eponym was given to this extraordinary man. A rare type of asteroid was named 9969 Braille by Nasa, a timeless tribute to a great human being. Thanks for watching. Don't forget to subscribe and click the bell to receive notifications for new videos. See you again soon.

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