BRAILLE

With six dots, 16-year-old Louis Braille changed the world. He invented a form of writing for blind people that enabled them to read and write.
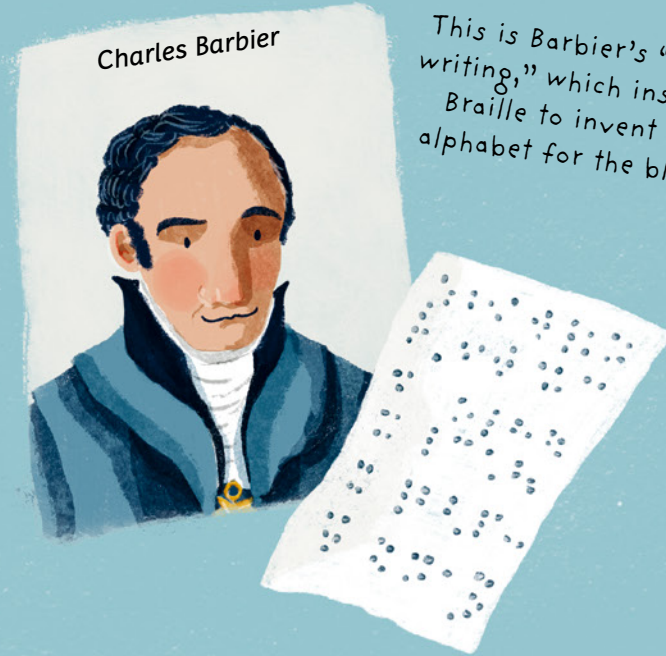
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q

Braille organized six dots, as on a dice. The simplest letter—"a"—is one dot at the top left.

Charles Barbier

This is Barbier's "night writing," which inspired Braille to invent his alphabet for the blind.

Braille's life story begins with a bad accident. When he was three, he stabbed himself in the eye with one of his father's tools by mistake. The injury became infected, and not long afterwards, the infection spread to the other eye, with the result that, by the age of five, Braille was completely blind. But he was very strong-willed and did not want to be shut out from life as he had known it. His father made him some wooden blocks with nails in that were arranged in the form of letters. With these, his parents taught him the alphabet. At that time, one of the first special schools for the blind was in Paris, and Braille was given a place there when he was 10.

The blind children learned mainly by listening to and repeating what the teacher said. This was called the "parrot" method, and it was heavy going! When Braille was 11, a visitor came to the school. His name was Charles Barbier and he was a soldier. He told the children about his invention of a special form of writing that soldiers had been using to send each other secret messages.

He called it "night writing" and explained that it consisted of raised dots imprinted on paper that represented letters and syllables that you could identify by touch. This enabled soldiers to read during the night without anyone else knowing and without having to light a lantern. This gave Braille the idea of using dots to create a form of writing that blind people could read with their fingers.

Just a few years later, he had devised an alphabet for the blind using six dots. It was an ingenious system: the dots could be combined in 64 different ways to create letters and numbers.

He also developed combinations of dots for mathematical symbols and musical notes. Braille was able to convince his headmaster that his alphabet worked, and his fellow students greeted it with great enthusiasm.
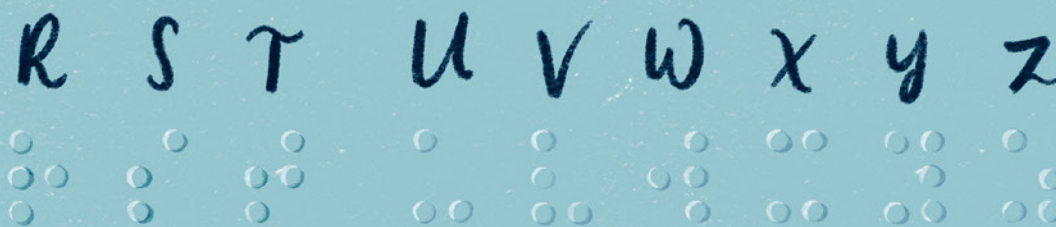
In 1878, it was decided by experts in the field that this form of writing should be used officially in schools for the blind. Today, braille is used all over the world to write different languages, numbers, musical notes, and chemical and mathematical formulas. Sometimes the dots can mean different things: for instance, the combination for the German "ch" is used for "th" in English texts, as well as for a "T" sound in Arabic and Hebrew. Braille is to be found on bank and insurance cards, and of course in books, including *The Gruffalo* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which are larger and thicker in braille than conventional editions.

Louis Braille

R S T U V W X Y Z

Today you can feel braille on packets of medicine.