Reading eBooks in Braille.

Part 1, 9th November 2021.

About your presenter

I am Sean Randall, born unexpectedly and many months early over 3 decades ago now. I was a hugely Braille-resistant child. The combination of them not having the stuff I wanted to read and me not being able to read fast seemed to be a barrier too far, and synthetic speech was my trusty friend for many years.

As an adult, nothing comes close to being able to sit in silence after a hard and loud day at work, and being able to keep reading in that silence is golden. Gone are the days of waiting for manually-transcribed Braille to arrive 6 months after everyone in the class had finished with the text – I buy a book the day it comes out and read it at the same time as everyone else now. I still can’t read as quickly as I can listen, but I always have both options open to me and wouldn’t want to be without either of them. Whether it’s a library book, something I’ve saved-up for and pre-ordered because I’m excited, a newspaper or magazine, or even a protracted blog or social media post, my fingers or ears can always take up the slack and keep me in the know, be it for pleasure, for work, or anything in between.

This is the first of two sessions around accessing ebooks with Braille technology. Next time, we’ll spend the whole slot on mainstream solutions, with all their inherent accessibility quirks and usability pros and cons. But today, the focus will be the variety of Braille devices on the market and how they stack up to each other, and the specialist libraries and resources we have access to within the BVI community.

## Braille reading devices

eBooks are of course by their nature digital. Still, it is worth pointing out that good Braille translation software and a Braille embosser can produce books, or parts of them, on paper using precise braille translation. This may come in particularly useful if you are learning the Braille code, for instance, and want a part of a book produced at a certain point partway through a Braille course. Whilst Braille embossers don’t fall into the Braille Display categories discussed below, they were worth mentioning here as a just-in-case. Of particular interest is the Cosmo EBrailler – a combination digital Braille typewriter and single-sheet Braille Embosser, for those who couldn’t afford a traditional embosser. See also canute360.

Braille notetakers also fall into a bit of a category of their own. Devices such as The Braille Note Touch+, Braille Sense, El Braille, esytime Evolution and Inside one all offer the idea of a Braille device with a complete computer driving things. Some of these can work in a hybrid fashion (such as the El Braille letting you use the display as a stand-alone device), and others can be fiddly to read even the simplest of Braille content (The BrailleNote’s brf reader is a little disappointing for instance). But their extra feature-sets (and often prices) put them out of the family of Braille displays I will be discussing.

### Category 1 Braille Displays: without memory, terminal only

These are what I call the first generation of Braille displays, which rely on connections to other hardware to be viable for reading with. Examples of this type of device include the first generation Brailliant, Focus or Alva Comfort models. These devices show you Braille, but only from a connected device, either with a cable or with a Bluetooth connection.

### Category 2 displays: with memory, brf only

The next step and natural evolution of the first category was devices with the ability to store and read Braille files of their own. Age isn’t an issue here, so we include products like the original Orbit reader 20, and also devices such as the Esys line of displays. The canute360 also fits here, although naturally it has a tremendous advantage over the others in that it sports many more cells than is typical for the market. This type of display is still available, although increasingly not being sold as new.

### Category 3 displays: with translation

These devices now make up the bulk of the market: the orbit reader 20+/40, qBraille and Focus 5th generation are good examples of these, devices which can take not only Braille files, but some other formats as well and make them into braille “on-the-fly”.

Of course, the formats supported, speed of Braille translation, type of memory used and other features continue to differentiate products in this category.

### Category 4displays: what I’ve labelled Next generation,, direct access to material

Finally, what I see as the next logical step for these devices is to be able to get to the content directly, without needing you to provide a file at all. A good example of this is the Humanware Brailliant BI series, which can already go online and retrieve content from Bookshare in the US by itself. Whilst at time of writing this doesn’t work in the UK, it’s only a matter of time before this happens with Humanware or another such manufacturer here too.

## BVI resources

The RNIB has undoubtedly the largest collection of resources within the Blind/Visually-impaired community in terms of access to books. In brief, these are:

* Reading services and NTNM, 2 websites designed for personal access to books or newspapers/magazines. Reading services (which is totally free to the customer) replaces the RNIB Bookstream and overdrive audiobook services, whilst adding in Braille to the collection in a supplementary service to the postal library of hard copy books. Many thousands of books are already available here in .brf format, some professionally transcribed, others generated by software.
* NTNM provides both regional and national newspapers and magazines at incredibly competitive pricing, although .brf is not available by default here.
* RNIB Bookshare for education is a different think from Bookshare, the US-lead library for blind individuals. RNIB Bookshare provides textbooks and thousands of other resources (including up-to-date stories and nonfiction), in a variety of formats including .brf. Access is supplied through an education provider rather than a personal account.
* Outside the RNIB, Bookshare UK is the international arm of Bookshare as mentioned above. For a $50 USD annual membership fee and a qualifying print disability, you can have access to a number of materials (although not as broad a range as in the US). This number may, or may have already, increased rapidly due to the signing of the Marrakesh VIP Treaty.
* Seeing ear, now the national accessible library, is another not for profit organisation based in the UK supplying books as word documents.
* .Brf and other braille files are also available from a number of more provincial sources, including the Bartimaeus Alliance of the Blind, Bibles for the Blind and so on. The Braillists forum will undoubtedly be a useful resource if you have enquiries about such material.

## Next time

Skipping a week for the Braille bar on the 16th, I’ll be back to take a look at the mainstream technologies we can use for accessing eBooks on Tuesday, November 23rd. The handout from that session will serve as an accompanying document to this, complete with a list of Braille devices mentioned this week and next, any new information that appears as a result of questions from the Braille bar and with clarifications or information provided to me by specialist libraries in the intervening time.