# Introduction to the slate and stylus (hand frame)

A hand frame is a simple braille writing tool. Also called slates, frames come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Most are very portable and can be very effective for jotting down a quick note. Frames also do not require batteries, firmware upgrades and all the other potential requirements of electronic devices.

Most frames consist of two hinged plates and a "stylus" used to produce the braille dots. The front side of the frame has a series of rectangular holes representing the braille cells. The back plate is often solid and contains indentations. The stylus is basically a large pin with a wooden or plastic handle which you use to punch the dots by hand. The sides of the holes representing the cells often have three indents for the dot positions.

A few frames are "upward writing" frames, with little pins on the back plate instead of indentations and the stylus is hollow instead of pointed.

Other frames (often for larger paper) have a wooden or metal back board and the frame itself only has one or two lines. As you write , you move the frame down the board for each pair of lines.

## Putting in the paper

If you have a frame consisting of two hinged plates, notice that one plate usually has little pins in each corner. These hold the paper steady and can also help accurately position the paper if you need to reinsert it.

Put the frame with the hinge on the left and open it. Line up the paper against the hinge and close the frame. Press the frame shut to lock the paper onto the guide pins and put the frame on a firm surface.

If you have the Janus frame, this is just a slide, so slide the index card in through the open end, with the closed end on the left. The front face of the Janus frame has six lines.

Be sure to use paper that is not too thick (it will require excess force to make the dots) and not too thin (you will make the dots too easily and they will wear faster).

## Holding the stylus

The stylus is equivalent to a pen. hold the stylus between your thumb and third (middle) finger and place your index finger over the top, so that the top of the stylus is between your knuckle and the top of your palm. Do not grip too hard. You can use a stylus left- or right-handed.

## First practice

If you have never used a frame before, the first practice is simply to write all six dots of several cells on the top line, to get used to the feel of writing.

Hold the stylus between your fingers as above and make sure it is upright, pointing directly at the paper.

Position the stylus at the top right corner of the top right cell of your frame. Then push to form the dot. You should feel a slight thump as the dot is formed against the back of the frame.

Now move the stylus down to the middle position of the first cell (still on the right). Push again to form the second dot.

And then move to the bottom right of the first cell to form the third dot.

Now move the stylus to the top left of the first cell and repeat from top to bottom, to form the remaining three dots of the braille cell.

Now move the stylus to the top right of the next cell and repeat dotting out the second full cell.

Continue making cells until you are ready to check your work so far. Open the frame and, if necessary, remove the paper to check your work.

Are all the dots clearly defined? Are there any dot positions which are causing more problems than others?

Reinsert the paper, using the guide pins if needed, and practise some more full cells to get comfortable with how the dots feel. When you are ready, move on to the second practice.

## Second practice

Move to the second line of the frame and go to the rightmost cell. In this practice, start to write the alphabet.

The letter A is braille dot 1. That is, it is the upper dot on the first side of the cell. So position the stylus top right of the first cell and make the dot.

Now move to the second cell for the letter B, the top and middle dots on the first side of the cell (that is, top and middle right dots).

Next, the letter C: the top dot on the first side and the top dot on the second side of the cell.

Don't worry if this all feels very strange now, as with most things, it gets easier and quicker the more you practise.

The fourth letter is D, the top dot on the first side of the cell and the top and middle dots on the second side.

Finally, write the letter E: the top dot on the first side and the middle dot on the second side of the cell.

You might like to remove the paper now to check your work so far. If you do, check to see all letters are correct. If not, try them again.

Then try writing some more letters of the alphabet in the remaining cells, such as F to J. As you previously wrote five letters, count six cells from the right before continuing.

Although we are currently writing the dots strictly in order, when you get confident, you can write them in any order you like. For example, starting at the bottom of the letter T and working up, moving straight across the middle of the cell and continuing up (dot 3, 2, 5, 4). This comes with practice.

Note: when you are comfortable with using the frame, you can gently move the stylus around a cell that is already written to check the character already there. This can be a good way to make sure you resume writing in the right place.

## Third practice

Move to the third line of the frame and move all the way to the right.

In this practice, try writing your name, or a couple of simple words.

If you use contracted (grade2) braille, try incorporating these into your writing. For example, try writing:

Fred Smith.

Today is Tuesday.

Hand frames are often used for your own notes, so you may use whatever braille code and/or personal abbreviations you like - so long as you can read it back afterwards.

## Practical uses for slate and stylus

The hand frame can be very convenient for writing a quick note. Many frames are pocket-sized, making them extremely portable, a bit like a pen and paper for sighted people.

You could for example:

* Note down important information on an envelope that came through the post
* Note down the price and basic details on a taxi receipt
* Keep a note of a telephone number
* Keep a to-do list or a diary

Unless you want the practice, you may find other braille equipment is more convenient for longer writing.

## Where to get hand frames

Most blindness organisations sell a range of hand frames or "slates" as they are called in the USA. Organisations include, but are not limited to:

* RNIB [www.rnib.org.uk/shop](http://www.rnib.org.uk/shop)
* Braille Superstore [www.braillebookstore.com](http://www.braillebookstore.com)
* MaxiAids [www.maxiaids.com](http://www.maxiaids.com)
* Amazon [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)
* The Braillists also offer free equipment [www.braillists.org](http://www.braillists.org)

For interest, Judy Dixon has a large personal collection of slates at [www.brailleslates.org](http://www.brailleslates.org)