THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SLATE AND STYLUS

Matthew Horspool: This episode of BrailleCast Extra is made possible thanks to a grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. For more information about the Trust, visit its website at wcmt.org.uk.

Welcome back. This is a recording of a session entitled An Introduction To The Slate And Stylus, otherwise known as a hand frame. It was presented on Tuesday, 10th November, 2020 and is introduced by Holly Scott-Gardner.

Holly Scott-Gardner: So thanks, everyone, for joining this Braillists event looking at using the slate and stylus, otherwise known as a Braille writing frame and we have James Bowden from the RNIB who will be helping teach this event today.

Hi, James.

James Bowden: Hi, Holly.

Holly Scott-Gardner: So I'm just going to go over a couple of quick Braillists things to start with and firstly, this event is running in line with our moderation policy. If anyone would like to check out the moderation policy, they can find it on the website at braillists.org. This event is also being recorded and we will be putting a copy of the event on our podcast feed which you can find on the website, either by going to braillecast.com or for more specific information about our previous events to braillists.org/media.

At the moment everyone is muted. However during the session, you will be able to unmute yourself in order to ask questions. We just ask because we've got such a big crowd today, which is wonderful, but if you are not asking a question and you're just working along through the activities, that you stay muted, that you only unmute if you have a clarifying question or something that you really need to ask. Alternatively if you don't feel comfortable muting, you can raise your hand. That is Alt+Y on Windows, Option Y on Mac and it is star nine on the phone and the More button in iOS and then Raise hand.

We have Ben Mustill-Rose here who is the moderator. Hi, Ben.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Hey, Holly. How are you doing today?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I am good, thank you. So if people raise their hands and you'll be calling on them, right? So they know who to listen out for.

So that seems like everything, I think, and as I said, sorry for the slight delay but we'll get started.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We have a raised hand already, Holly. I'm not sure whether we want to go to hands quite yet or whether we want to get going and then go to questions later.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I think we'll go to this because it could be important.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Okay, so we have [UNSURE OF NAME] with his hand raised. So just asked you to unmute yourself there. You should have a dialog on your screen, asking you to unmute. There you are. You're good to go. Hello.

[UNSURE]: Hello, good evening, everyone. It's [UNSURE OF NAME] and thank you. Actually just to confirm, which one we are demonstrating today. So I've got five different kinds of material. I'm really new with Braille, I'm sorry. So I just wanted to make sure I'm going to use the right one.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Okay, so what we're demonstrating today is a Braille writing frame and actually to start off the session, James will be describing what writing frames look like. So based on that description, you should be able to find the one you need and if you can't, after the description, I'd ask you to raise your hand again just to check.

[UNSURE]: Thank you very much.

Holly Scott-Gardner: So, James, are you ready to get started?

James Bowden: Thank you very much, Holly, and thank you, everyone, for coming. It's great to see so many people here and it's great to find so much interest in what perhaps is the simplest of Braille writing equipment, the hand frame or as the Americans call them, the slate and stylus.

It's very portable. I have four different slates or hand frames here. I'll use the terms interchangeably throughout the time, don't worry, they mean the same thing. They are extremely small, some of them, very lightweight. You can carry it in a purse or a handbag or in your pocket or whatever and it's almost the equivalent of having a pen and paper to note things on.

So, Braillists have been giving away equipment, one of which is this amazing A4 slate which I am holding to the camera for those who like to see things. It is two hinged plates, if you like. The front plate has lots of little holes in it, little rectangular holes for the Braille cells and the back plate is a solid plastic plate and it's got lots of indentations in it.

There's a little plastic bevel at the very bottom in the centre. I'll come onto that in a moment.

On the top edge of the front, it says, "Worth Trust Katpadi India," the maker of this frame. Down the side, on the right-hand side, every other line has a number on it, two, four, six, eight, ten, 12 up to 26 and there's one beyond that's 27.

There are 30 cells per line and as you go across the front of the frame, there are dots at the quarter, half and three-quarters of the way along the line.

So it's quite helpful for navigating around the page as well when you're writing.

Matthew Horspool: James, sorry to interrupt. I've just had some feedback that you need to move your camera down slightly or toward you if you're using a laptop.

James Bowden: Thank you very much. Is that better?

Matthew Horspool: I'll let you know. I can't see it. I'm just the messenger.

James Bowden: Fair enough.

So this frame is the size of a piece of A4 paper. If you like dimensions, that's round about 21cm by 29.7, if I get my centimetres right, or basically 9 inches by 12, thereabouts. But we don't have to have a full frame like that. My favourite frame, which I got years ago, back in the 1980s, I don't think you can get this one anymore, is this little one. It looks extremely shiny, unlike the A4 one, this is made of metal. Again it's two hinged plates and it is just eight rows by 18 cells, nice pocket-sized one.

I've got one smaller than that which is 15 cells by four lines. This is called the King frame, King pocket frame, and this is an interesting one because it's an upward writing frame but we'll not get into that too much today.

I remember when I was in America once, I found this little cute one which is just one line and it's 25 cells so it's really, really tiny. What would you use that one for? Well, how about labelling tape?

So there's loads of different styles out there. The Braillists is also giving out, though I haven't one got one here, the Janus frame which is just a slidy thing. You slide the paper into it rather than having a hinge.

So they come in all sorts of shapes and sizes but they all basically work the same.

Now, with the frame, the other part of it is the stylus. The stylus is basically a big pin and it's got a wooden or plastic handle. This one has a wooden handle. You basically use it to prick out each individual dot.

So, how to hold the stylus? This is quite important because if you do it wrong, you'll end up with wrist ache or arm ache or you just won't make the dots. I hold it between my thumb and third finger and then I put my index finger over the top so it's underneath the first joint of your finger, between the palm and your knuckle. So you can get a lot of power, downward pressure onto the actual paper through the stylus.

You can use a stylus left-handed or right-handed, depending on your preference. I'm left-handed so I use mine in my left hand. So you've got the thumb and the third finger, or your middle finger, around the edges of it and your index finger over the top, curled over the top. You don't need to point your finger, just curled over the top, so it's three fingers round the far end of the wooden handle, if that makes sense, and then your hand over the top.

Let's insert some paper. So I'm going to use the A4 frame, the big one, so if everybody's got that frame, it's the one the Braillists are using, you can follow along exactly the same. If you have a different frame, hopefully you can follow along as well because they're all very similar, just different sizes.

So I've got a piece of A4 paper here which I'm going to put onto the back plate. It doesn't show on camera because I haven't got enough space to hold it up in front of the camera. I'm putting it against the hinge on the left, so I've got the hinge on the left and the hand frame is open and I'm sliding the paper down the frame until it hits that pin at the bottom. So it's against the hinge on the left and against the pin on the bottom and the frame is open, flat on my desk. I'm now going to shut the hinge and hopefully the paper will stay where it is. At the top of the frame, there were two little plastic pins which will hopefully make a nice satisfying click, click as it goes through the paper to hold it steady.

Do feel free to follow along. This is hopefully a practical session so if you haven't done so and you need to, get some paper and put it in your frame and then hold the stylus. Just a reminder, your thumb and your middle finger go round it and your index finger goes over the top with the top of the stylus between your knuckle and the top of your palm.

The first writing practice is basically just to get used to the feel of punching dots with the hand frame and we're going to write effectively all six dots on all the cells. So, if you like, "for" signs.

You start on the right-hand edge, so the top line, and the right-hand edge of the frame and I'm going to start with the top right-hand dot which is Dot 1. So the top right hand cell, the top right of the first cell on the first line and I'm just going to push the dot and hopefully this might come over the microphone, I made the dot, a nice satisfying click.

Now, move the stylus down to the middle position. You'll notice at the sides of the cell, if you just move the stylus up and down, you can feel that there are three positions, corresponding to the top, middle and bottom of the Braille cell. If you just run it against the edge, you should be able to feel slight indentations. I hope that's coming over the mic as well which is quite useful. Remember to hold the style vertical, if you're running with a flat slate, so it's at right angles, upright, so you get the maximum impact.

So I'm now going to make the second dot and move down to the bottom position, then across to the second half of the cell, if you like the left-hand side or bottom, 4, 5 and 6.

So the second cell, move to the second cell and repeat, 1, 2, 3 down the right-hand side and then 4, 5, 6 down the left-hand side.

I've done two "for" signs so far and I'm going to suggest we just practice those "for" signs for a minute so you get the feel of how that works and we'll take questions in this time as well if there are any questions so far.

Ben Mustill-Rose: So no questions as of yet, James, but just a quick reminder, if anyone does have any questions, about what we've covered, you can raise your hand by pressing Alt+Y on Windows, Option Y on Mac, star nine if you're dialling in from a phone or find the Raise Hand button if you're using the iPhone app.

Ed Rogers: I've got a quick question, James. It's Ed here.

James Bowden: Hi, Ed.

Ed Rogers: Hello. I tend to use the really small frames. I'm practicing with a four cell by 18, I think, four line by 18. I always find that when you're using the small frames, it's really difficult not to basically hurt your hands with the holding of it. Do you have any tips on that?

James Bowden: Yes, firm surface. Firm surface. So if I've got this little eight by eight. I've got an eight line by 18 so it's possibly bigger than yours. I'd either put it on a flat desk in front of me or I could rest it on my knees but you need to keep the frame as steady as possible to get the maximum impact of the stylus.

The other thing of course is if you're reaching out a long distance from yourself, that also makes it harder so you'll find sometimes the bottom lines, the lines closest to you, are actually easier to write than the top line and sometimes the lines in the middle of the frame are easier than the lines at the extreme edges.

Ed Rogers: Thanks. Just one more question. Obviously lots of people who use frames end up punching onto whatever paper is around. Can you just use thick card?

James Bowden: That's a very good question. So I think you really, ideally need to use ordinary Braille paper. I think Braille papers are normally around 130 grams per square metre. If you have too thin paper, like ordinary print paper which is around 80gsm, you'll find that you can make the dots really, really easily but they'll wear out really fast. If you use thick card, you'll find it incredibly difficult to punch through it. So anything, I would say, above 160, 170, gets difficult. I do remember years ago, I had some business cards for a conference and they weren't Brailled so I went up to my hotel room and spent half an hour giving myself wrist ache because the card was very, very thick.

Ed Rogers: That is exactly the circumstance I was thinking of and if Liam was on the call, he would mention that if you're practicing and you've got some train tickets, they're quite useful.

James Bowden: Yes, train tickets. They're reasonably thin, a little bit thicker than Braille paper but they're not too bad for practicing.

Practice on standard Braille paper. If you want to do the power dotting, we'll get thicker card. If you want to give your wrist a rest, use thinner paper but remember it won't stay so long.

Ed Rogers: Thanks, James.

Ben Mustill-Rose: No other questions yet, James, but really good info to know. Thank you. I'm learning a lot, definitely.

James Bowden: Alright. Shall we see how people have got on with their first line of "for" signs?

So open your frame carefully and you'll notice that the top of the page, on the reverse side, has your Braille and I've written one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight "for" signs. How are people getting on?

Dave Williams: Hi, James.

James Bowden: Hi, Dave.

Dave Williams: I've written some "for" signs. Jane [UNSURE OF NAME] is going to come in with a question in a second. I was going to ask you about styles, as in styluses or dotters as we sometimes call them, whether the type of dotter makes much difference. I think one of the reasons why Ed, Liam and I have so much fatigue with writing business cards in hotel rooms or whatever, is because the styluses, certainly the one I've got, are kind of saddle-shape, with the kind of pointy-up sort of ears at the top and it's not a great design. I remember when I told Judy Dixon about this stylus, she said, "Oh, I hate that stylus." So I just wondered how much difference you found between different styles and whether there's a particular one that you would recommend that's perhaps more comfortable in the hand.

James Bowden: I wouldn't recommend a particular one because everybody's different. Back in the day, there were all sorts of different styles that you could get. I've got a wooden one with a nice round handle. The one that you're mentioning, the saddleback one, is supposed to keep your finger straight and actually reduce the strain but some of them, little thin plastic things, are a little bit nasty. I didn't particularly get on with it.

The other thing that makes a difference is the thickness of the end of the pin so I've got two styles here. One is very much sharper than the other. I tend to use the one with the bigger point because I find it seems to ride much more easily on the frame. In fact I'm going to try the other one just to make some more "for" signs, just to see if I get along with it.

Matthew Horspool: Whilst James is doing that, I want to take a moment to apologise to people who received our Janus frame because that had the particular type of stylus that Dave is rightly complaining about. So hopefully people are receiving better ones now.

Dave Williams: Yes, so I'm still using it. It's certainly usable, it'll do the job but it's just, if you've got a lot to write, then it can become tiring. Sorry, Ben, I think Jane had a hand raised.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Yes, so just bringing you in now, Jane. There you are. You're good to go.

James Bowden: Hi, Jane.

Jane: Hello, James. I'm finding this really difficult because A, I'm not used to it and B, it looks as though I've only managed to do one of the "for" signs without too much difficulty but it's tricky if you've never done it before.

James Bowden: Absolutely, and that is why we're starting with just writing "for" signs.

Jane: Yes. I've got a lot of Qs, letter Q has come out about four times. I've got one "for", that's it.

James Bowden: So that means it's the Dot 6 that's giving you the trouble.

Jane: Yes.

James Bowden: So I would suggest, just practice writing the Dot 6 and make sure that the style is kind of vertical, is upright. If you have it at an angle, you'll find that some of the dots won't come out properly. So make sure it's kind of upright, as upright as you can get it and then you'll find it makes that nice satisfying click, much more easily.

Jane: Okay. I'll give that a go. Thank you, James.

James Bowden: Alright.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good tip. We have a couple of raised hands now so we're going to come to Alan [PHONETIC: Dyte] and then after Alan, we're going to go to Ken. So just ask you to unmute, Alan. There you are.

James Bowden: Hi, Alan.

Ben Mustill-Rose: You've just muted yourself again.

Alan: I've unmuted. You mentioned, and Dave mentioned, dotters, different shapes and sizes. Do they have names and how can we order them?

James Bowden: The normal one that you get with the frame is the default one. The RNIB currently only have the one kind, I think, in the catalogue. I checked the other day. But different sellers may have different ones. They used to have names such as saddleback, mushroom, round and all sorts of other interesting names, describing the shape of the top of part of the handle, basically.

Dave Williams: I think the RNIB one is wooden and round, if memory serves, and it's about £4.

Alan: Thanks, Dave. Thanks, James.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to go to Ken next and after Ken we're going to come to [PHONETIC: Iain]. You're good to go now, Ken.

Ken: Hi there, James.

James Bowden: Hi, Ken, how are you?

Ken: Hi there. Good, thank you. My question is about my posture when I'm doing this. So you said you want the slate on a firm, flat surface which is great. Should my arms be resting on the table or should I be holding my arms out from my shoulders?

James Bowden: Now that's a very good question. How I tend to do it is I kind of have my forearm on the frame and then with the heel of your hand on the frame and then you can get the maximum pressure and leverage on the dot. That's the way I do it. I'm not sure if that's correct technique but it seems to work for me. I haven't caused myself any RSI yet.

Ken: My instincts went that way but that's very helpful.

James Bowden: Yes, so you've got that leverage against the frame as well, by doing that.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Definitely good to know, so we're going to come to [PHONETIC: Iain] next and after that, we're going to come to Steph.

Iain: Hello. I was shocked that a style costs £4 because when I used to buy them, I think they were more like three old pence. One of the things I find helpful is what you do with your non-writing hand and I think really this would only work if you're right-handed, if you've got the style in your right hand. So have your left hand on the frame, almost touching the point of the style so that it helps to keep it straight when you're punching it into the paper. I used to find that helpful. The other thing, it's obviously a matter of personal choice, but I always find it easier, if you're doing a "for" sign for example, to do the top dots, to do 1 and 4 and then 5 and 2 and then 3 and 6 so you're going across the cell and when you're finished, you're in the position to go onto the next one. Does that make sense?

James Bowden: Yes, it certainly does. I was going to say that later on. When you get really confident, you can do the dots in any order you like. So, for example, if I was writing, say, the word "difficult", not perhaps a particularly good word, at the moment but the end of the word is LT so I'd come down the L from the top to the bottom and then I'd carry on, on the bottom and start the T with the Dot 3 and then work it backwards, if you like, upwards.

Iain: Yes.

James Bowden: 3, 2, 5, 4. So it depends how confident you are and the letters you're doing as well. I like your tip about using your other hand to keep on. I actually tend to use my other hand, in my case, my right hand, to sort of trace the cell behind so that makes sure that I don't skip a cell or anything like that. You kind of just judge the distance and so on. Good point, thank you.

Iain: If you're using your left hand to do the dotting, as it were, you can't use your right hand in the way that I would. So it really depends on whether you're left-handed or right-handed how you do that.

James Bowden: I do use it in a similar way to that. I do feel the point of the frame with my right hand, making sure it's in the right place. I do trace along with it so, yes, you can. It's a cell behind instead of a cell in front, that's the difference.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good, thank you. Really interesting. So we're going to come to Claudia and then after Claudia, we're going to come to Andrew Jones.

Claudia: Hello. I only have a few questions because I'm using the Janus frame. I know how to write on the frame because I was taught at school and to be honest, I was really lucky because I am from Poland and in Poland there are quite a few schools for blind children but only there, the one school which I went to, does teach how to write on the writing frame so I count myself lucky. I don't know whether you know the Janus frame but is it a double-sided frame? I'm a little confused because there are holes on both sides of the frame.

James Bowden: Yes, that's a very good question. The Janus frame is a double-sided frame. It has six lines on the front of the frame and five lines on the back, giving you a total of 11 lines and it's what they call interline Braille. So you have the dots of the second side of the page between the lines of the first side of the page so you've got a line of the front, line of the back, line of the front, line of the back and so on and it's a little bit like double line spacing Braille but it's a little bit narrower because you've just got the width of the cell rather than the space as well so it's what they call interline and you can do 11 lines on the one sheet of paper, six on the front and five on the back.

Claudia: Yes, I thought about this and I wasn't sure which one was the front, if the front was the six lines or the five lines.

James Bowden: Yes, it's with the six lines.

Claudia: Right, okay. Thank you for that. Also I did practice the six dots as well , just to remind me because I know how to write but it was a long time since I've done it so I did quite well. The other thing is because I know you said you have a metal frame, I have a metal frame as well and on the Janus frame, there is a ridge to follow the dots but I don't know, maybe I've got the wrong frame but when I've got the metal frame, I cannot feel a few of the ridges. Is that the same with yours?

James Bowden: No, my metal frame has definitely got ridges at the sides of the cell. Can you hear that?

Claudia: Yes.

James Bowden: So it depends on the frame. Some frames don't have those little ridges on the side.

Claudia: Yes, that's what I thought.

James Bowden: And that does make it harder.

Claudia: I don't think mine has those but when I was writing on the Janus, I was like, yes, I can do that, I can do much, much more and to be fair, because mine didn't have ridges, I really hated writing on the frame. I always wanted to have a smaller frame so I could have it in my bag. I remember reading some articles about people just jotting notes. I don't want to carry an A4 frame with me in my backpack. I want to have it in my purse. It's been a really useful reminder.

And just a suggestion really, because I know people say that 130 grams squared is the weight of the Braille paper, to be honest, I would go for 160 because it's much better because Braille stays longer on it.

James Bowden: It depends what you want to use it for. 130 is what they call lightweight Braille paper and 160 is what they call heavyweight Braille paper. Most books, I think, are produced on 130. It's up to you. The thicker paper, the dots will last longer.

Claudia: I thought that books should really be produced on the heavier paper because if just a few Braillists read it and the book is gone.

James Bowden: It depends how heavy-handed you are.

Claudia: Not me!

James Bowden: I did hear once that at one point they produced magazines on 100gsm because it was cheaper paper.

Claudia: That's impossible.

James Bowden: You can do it.

Claudia: I know it's possible.

James Bowden: Okay, thank you, Claudia.

Ed Rogers: I'm going to come in on that briefly to say apparently those ridges inside the cell are called grommets, I think, and the ones that Steph is sending out that Ben said we'll talk about later, we're making sure to only send ones out that have those ridges inside the cells so plenty of grommets.

Matthew Horspool: Sorry to interrupt. Hello, James. Just to add to what you were saying about paper, because basically you're right but what I would add to that from a production point of view is that we only talk about gsm in terms of paper because gsm is the only common metric that we can measure but there is actually more to do with the grain of the paper and the way the paper is produced. We can't really talk about that because they don't advertise how that's done. But 130gsm paper is not the same as another 130gsm paper. So, yes, books are done on 135gsm paper but maybe err on the heavier side if you're not sure because it's quite a specific formula of 135gsm paper that they're using.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Always good to know, nice paper fact there. Andrew Jones, there you are, you're good to go.

Andrew Jones: Hello, everyone. I have a comment and a question. So, when I started learning, I got the Dot-to-dot program which was quite a few years back. I didn't use it for several years but I got issued with what I think was Brailon paper which is a little bit plasticky but for anyone who's struggling to read what they've written, I found that easier to read the dots using the Brailon paper. It's a little bit more expensive and doesn't come in so many sizes but I did find it much easier to read and I think it probably would last a bit longer. The dots are a bit crisper.

So that was my comment. The Dot-to-dot thing at the time came with what I think was called a King roller and it's an upward frame. So you didn't write backwards. You had to write in the normal way as you would on a Perkins. So I wondered if in using these frames, is there a benefit in terms of really forcing your understanding of what makes up different words and contractions by having to learn it backward or write it backwards?

James Bowden: Okay. So, you'll notice I have not used that word beginning with B, ending with S. You write it right to left instead of left to right. You still write with Dot 1 2 3 4 5 6, okay? So the upward writing frame, as you say, the huge advantage of them is that you write left to right, just as you would read, and you can lift the hinge of the frame and immediately read what you've written, without having to take the paper out the frame and so on.

The disadvantage that some people find with the upward writing frames is that the dot quality is not quite as good as the downward writing frame.

Andrew Jones: Okay. That's interesting. Thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Andrew. No more hands for now, James.

James Bowden: So, shall we move to practice number two? This is where things can get interesting and this is why I don't use the word beginning with B and ending with S. We're going to start writing some letters of the Braille alphabet.

If you are all ready with your frames, move to the first cell, which is on the right-hand side, of the second line. Okay, so that's the first cell on line two. On the A4 frame, there's a letter B, if you like, to the right of where your stylus is which is line two.

We're going to write the top right-hand dot or Dot 1. So it's the right-hand side, the top dot and of course that's Dot 1 for the letter A. Move to the next cell and do the top and middle dot on the right-hand side and that's the letter B. Two top dots on the third cell for the letter C, start on the right and move to the left. And then the fourth cell is the letter D, so it's the top dot on the first side or the right-hand side and the top and middle dots on the second side or left side. Then the final one we'll do is the letter E so on the fifth cell, we'll do the top dot on the right and the middle dot on the left.

Open the frame and see what the result is like. Hopefully we've written the letters A, B, C, D, E.

It can be a bit hard to start with, having to think what dots are in this cell, rather than the shape you normally read but if you think of what dots are in the cell, start on the right-hand side, Dots 1 2 3 and then the left-hand side for Dots 4 5 6, go from the top to the bottom, you should get some good results. It takes a lot of practice to get a good speed going but it comes with time and practice like most things.

When you're ready, put the paper back in. Use the locator pins to make sure it's nice and straight. Close the frame. So we're on the second line and I'm going to count one, two, three, four, five, six for the next position. Just move the stylus around the cell without pushing and you'll find the paper's nice and flat to space. Now if you go to the previous [INAUDIBLE], there's actually dots there, you know you're actually going to overwrite a character so don't do that. So on the sixth cell, one, two, three, four, five, six, and ready to write the letter F which is the top and middle dot on the first side, Dots 1 and 2 and the top dot on the second side, on the left-hand side.

I'm going to go on mute and I'll give you a couple more minutes to see if we can write F, G, H, I and J and if you're really keen, you can carry on. There's plenty of space on the A4 frame.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good luck with that, everybody, and we'll come back in a minute or two when everyone's had a chance to give that a go.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Well, thanks for that so far. I think it's really, really great. I'm enjoying it, I'm getting lots of slating practice in which is helpful. I'll try not to distract you guys too much while you're trying to concentrate, with all my talking. But it's been really interesting. I have been slating for a year and I think something that James said really stood out to me which was that it takes practice. So actually it's a year and a half ago that I started learning to slate and now I would say I'm pretty good at it. I don't want to say that because I know people who are really, really good but it's just something, if you invest a small amount of time every couple of days or even every day, if you can, at first there's this awful first month, like anything, like when you learn a language where you're struggling through and then suddenly one day it will be a lot easier. So it does just take time.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Definitely sound advice there. Not sure whether you want to go to hands at the moment, James. We have Alan [PHONETIC: Dyte] with a question.

James Bowden: Yes, go for it, Alan.

Alan: Yes, James, I've been a Braillist all my life and I've just had one of these frames, Janus frames, and it's only since I've been sitting here tonight that I've noticed these dots on the side of the frame, in between the lines.

James Bowden: That will be to show your position along the line. So count the cells and see how many spaces there are between the dots. It's probably a locator line, every other five cells.

Alan: Yes, five, five, five. Absolutely, yes.

James Bowden: That's right. So you can just count how many cells along the line you are.

Alan: I've never noticed that before. I thought I'd ask you because there may be a special way of using that.

James Bowden: No, it's just for location. So the A4 frames that the Braillists are sending out, they've got a locator dot after, I think, it's eight and then seven and then another seven so it's a quarter, half and three-quarters of the way along a 30 cell line.

Alan: That's really brilliant. You could write address cards with that quite comfortably.

James Bowden: Yes. So just thinking of a little bit of history while people are doing that. I decided to learn to use the frame when I was a teenager. I was given this little eight by 18 frame and I thought I'd better learn to use this thing, it might come in handy one day. I deliberately decided to write a diary, just a short one page a day thing during the school half-term or something and incredibly slow at first but as you get on with it, the more you do something, as Holly said, the easier it gets. Then it really came into its own for me when I went to visit my cousins in Australia back in the previous century. I didn't have any high tech Braille equipment at the time. I didn't have any high tech voice recording stuff like we have nowadays and instead I just took my hand frame and a load of paper with me, just a small pocket frame, and I wrote a diary in highly contracted Braille, using all kinds of crazy abbreviations and the challenge was reading it back afterwards. But it was a really good way of keeping a record of what was a very special holiday.

Do we have any more raised hands? How are people getting on writing letters of the alphabet?

Ben Mustill-Rose: We have [PHONETIC: Laurent] with his hand raised so there you are, you're good to go.

Laurent: Hi there, guys, hi, James. James, I just like that point that you made about your diary because I've always thought how much emotion sighted people can put into their writing using a pen and paper and I was just wondering whether for you the whole feel, the whole experience of writing with a slate as opposed to, for example, writing with a Perkins or writing with a computer now, being able to use your own codes, your own kind of stuff that your mind comes up with, whether that gives the whole thing a different kind of texture.

James Bowden: Something I haven't thought about actually because you're right. With print, you can have angry handwriting or scrawly handwriting or little neat handwriting and all sorts of things. We don't have that kind of luxury in Braille. The dots are still the dots and we don't really make big bold ones and little faint ones and different sizes or anything like that. We don't really have the variation to do that, sadly, but, no, it's something I haven't thought of before, really.

Laurent: Yes, that's quite interesting. When I write Braille nowadays, it's on a Braille note taker and I have to bear in mind, does this conform to the code that the note taker understands, as opposed to does this express me. So, yes, I was just wondering a little bit about that.

James Bowden: I like those note takers where you can write whatever you like, unless it needs to be translated into print. So far I've used Braille displays to read Braille music and not many of them can cope with that, let me put it that way. So let me write my dots.

Laurent: Yes. Just one other thing. With the A4 frame from the Worth Trust, I noticed that there are actually very useful little holes on the side that you can punch through if you want to file your papers.

James Bowden: Oh, yes, down the left-hand side, just right by the hinge, there are little pairs of one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, lots of them actually and I guess you can use them to punch holes, like you say, for the right size of paper that you have.

Laurent: Yes, I thought that was a fun little thing which the designers of the frame have thought of. There's another small tiny little hole on the top left which I thought could potentially be a good place to just park your stylus, when you're not using the frame and you need it to not go anywhere.

James Bowden: Is that at the actual top edge of the frame, right next to the hinge?

Laurent: It's right next to the hinge and probably about two centimetres below the top edge.

James Bowden: Ah, yes.

Laurent: For me, I think of that as the parking hole but I wonder whether it has an official function.

James Bowden: It does have that function. My stylus doesn't really lie in it very well, maybe because the point's not too long.

Excellent.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good to know, nonetheless. We don't have any more hands at the moment. Just to give you a time check, we've got roughly ten minutes left.

James Bowden: The last practice which I will leave as an exercise for the class, if you like, is to write some real words on the third line of the frame. So in the notes which I gave Holly earlier, I suggested you can write things like "Fred Smith" or you can write, "Today is Tuesday," and you can use whatever Braille code you want, whatever abbreviations, contractions etc that you want because hand frames are generally used for your own notes, unless you pass it round and the other person has to know the same code as you're using.

We might do another session at some time about highly contracted codes but we're not going to cover that today.

So as an exercise for the class, use the remaining lines to start writing some real words and keep checking your work occasionally to make sure you're doing it right. Remember, start at the top right of each line and work left and if you're really confident, you can do the dots in any order you like. If you just want to practice, remember to go down, Dot 1, Dot 2, Dot 3 on the right-hand side, Dot 4, Dot 5, Dot 6 on the left-hand side.

So we've talked a little bit about the uses of frames. Some practical uses, I mentioned a diary. I normally use a frame nowadays to write on blank envelopes containing blank pieces of paper which come through the post. Some of these need to be kept apparently, if it's a reminder of, for example, a hospital appointment and you've got to take the letter with you or whatever. So write on the envelope, it came on 20th of 5th, 1972 and it really needs to be thrown away now, etc.

I have also heard some people, and, Dave, I know you do this, use a frame to write on the back of taxi receipts to say, yes, this was a taxi dated 8th of August and I went to such and such and it costs £3.90, or whatever. Really useful to identify those blank bits of paper that we all seem to acquire and don't know what to do with, apart from throw them away. Some of them are important and we need to keep them and hand them in to get money back. So that's another great tip.

I'm sure we've all got other possible uses of hand frames, answers on a post card or even an index card, if you're using a Janus frame.

So finally, where can you get frames and how many different varieties are there? Basically it looks like, from what I have found, most blindness organisations do sell a range of frames. It might be a small range, it might be a large range. Take your pick really. I even found them on Amazon, would you believe? You can just type into Google, "Braille frame" or "Braille hand frame" or "Braille slate and stylus," see what comes up and all sorts of things do. The RNIB sell three frames currently. One is a Marburg frame which is an A4 frame, quite similar, I think, to the Worth Trust one. Then there's the Janus frame which some of you have got, which as I've mentioned is an interline frame so you've got six lines on the front and five lines on the back. You just turn the whole slate over and carry on writing. That goes on three by five inch index cards.

Then the other frame that the RNIB sells is called a Jumbo frame. I believe it does Jumbo Braille. I've not actually seen it so I don't know. Jumbo Braille basically is bigger Braille cells so little bit technical, the dot spacing on ordinary standard Braille cells is 2.5 millimetres. In Jumbo Braille it's 3.2 millimetres so it is actually significantly bigger. I think the frame is four lines by 18, so it says. I've not seen it so I don't know for sure but that's what it says.

Other frames, we've talked about upward writing ones. I have got an old frame back at my parents' house which has a wooden board on the back and then you've got to clamp two hinged plates with just the pins to locate the paper at the top and then you have the frame and it's just two lines on it and it slots into holes on the wooden backboard. So you write the two lines, then slide the frame down, crash, into the position and then you write the next two lines and slide it down again, all the way down to the bottom of the page. So that was another style of frame.

If we're talking about an amazing collection of slates, if people really are interested, then Judy Dixon, of the USA, has an amazing collection of over 200 unique slates from all around the world, ranging from little tiny things to amazing big things and there's even one which doesn't even require paper. Absolutely amazing collection and you can find that at brailleslates.org.

That's all I wanted to say, really. I hope that has been interesting, helpful, useful perhaps. In the final few minutes, are there any questions?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I know I found that really interesting so thank you so much and you're absolutely right about the RNIB slates. I've also seen those three. I actually have the Marburg slate. It's the one I use and it's a very nice A4 slate. Thank you, James, so much for this and it was really, really wonderful and I think it's so great to see so much interest in learning how to write using a slate and stylus and I hope that we can get you guys back again. If anyone wants more of these kinds of things, then let us know because we are running more events. So if you thought, oh, this is really useful, then please tell us because we definitely want to know what you would enjoy as well.

Dave Williams: We've got four raised hands, some people with questions.

Ben Mustill-Rose: So if we go to Alan Thorpe first and then we'll go to Ken. Hey, Alan.

Alan Thorpe: Just to say to James, thank you. I do have quite a selection of slates here, varying shapes and sizes, including one that actually goes down to four cells on one line which I was told-

James Bowden: That's the Margin frame.

Alan Thorpe: Margin frame. I was also told they were marking out bank notes. Yes, many, many different ones and another interesting one was one that actually uses a roll effect, a bit like an extra wide bus ticket so you can keep feeding it through. Quite an interesting collection. I shall go and look at the other ones that you mentioned earlier.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, and Alan [PHONETIC: Dyte] next and then we'll come to Ken.

Alan: Hello, yes. I don't want to ask a question. I want to tell the people from Braillists, I haven't received my slate yet. I had a message from Stephanie to say, "Use your slate," but I haven't got one yet. Has it been mislaid or am I making a mistake?

Ben Mustill-Rose: I think the best thing to do would be follow up with Steph, outside of the session, just reply to the email that you received but thank you for flagging that.

Alan: Okay, Ben, will do.

Ben Mustill-Rose: It's always good to check these things. We're going to Ken and then Claudia. Hey, Ken.

Ken: Hi, there, James. Thanks very much for that. That was the first time I've ever tried doing that so it's been really good. My hand is hurting already.

James Bowden: Oh, dear, remember, don't grip the stylus for grim death. They used to say with beginning flute players, don't grip it with rigor mortis.

Ken: Yes. I got to the end of the line in my little note that I was writing and I was halfway through a word. Is there a way of kind of guessing or knowing? How do you know? In particular because I am left-handed like yourself, so I can't feel forward with my left hand.

James Bowden: That's a very, very good question. What I tend to do is kind of feel with the heel of your hand that you're approaching the edge. That's the way I do it left-handed. Then I just pause and then look at the number of cells, just with my other hand, going beyond the style, that's the way I do it.

Ken: Okay, thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good tip there. And last, but by no means least, we have Claudia. There you are, you're good to go.

Claudia: Hello. I have a few questions. When writing on the Janus frame and you need to turn it over so I can write on the second side, does it matter which way I turn?

James Bowden: Yes, it does.

Claudia: And I don't mean the horizontal. I know it's always the horizontal but-

James Bowden: It's a very good question. Because if you flip it or rotate it so the right becomes the left, that way round, that's the way to do it. So you turn it over so that the open side is on the left instead of on the right. If you flipped it the other way so the top became the bottom, then you will actually be writing the other side upside-down.

Claudia: Yes, that's what I thought.

James Bowden: If you think how a book works, you turn the pages from right to left, so you need to turn the frame the same way as a page.

Claudia: So I start first with the paper opening on the right and then I finish it with the paper opening on the left.

James Bowden: That's right.

Claudia: Okay, that's helpful. I just want to mention, relating to what the previous person said, sometimes what I do, not always but sometimes when I approach the end of the line and I'm not sure whether the word will fit in, but sometimes I count the cells to see how much I've got left. Just to make sure and then either put a 3 and 6 to kind of move the rest of the word to the-

James Bowden: That's right, the hyphen.

Claudia: Yes, to go to the next line or just ignore it and go to the next line anyway. So just a suggestion.

James Bowden: No, it's a good one. Thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Great, thanks for that. No more hands now so back to Holly.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Perfect. Thank you, everyone. So, again, thanks to James for running this event today and really introducing everyone to the slate and stylus or Braille writing frame. I was slate-educated in America so I do say slate but you can call it either one. Thanks to Ben for moderating. I definitely appreciate that a lot too.

Just a quick reminder that the Tuesday events are continuing and next week, we will be looking at using Braille to learn languages. Now, you don't have to already know another language, you just maybe have to be interested in maybe one day learning one or you could speak seven languages and know ten different language Braille codes. Anyone is welcome and we'll be talking about all different kinds of ways you can use Braille to learn languages and I will be leading that.

The week after on the 24th, James is coming back to lead a session on Braille music so that's really exciting.

I don't think we have any more questions or anything, so we're going to wrap this up. Thank you, everyone.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thank you, everyone.

James Bowden: Thank you, everyone, for coming. I hope that's been helpful. If anybody's got any questions, do sent them in to the Braillists and I'll be very happy to try to answer them.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thanks for that. I'm sure they will.

Dave Williams: So if you want to hear this session again, it will be available through our media page and the BrailleCast Extra, give us a couple of days to sort that our and we will be making that available if you want to listen back to the session.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Great, thanks for that, Dave, and I should just quickly add that there will be some supplementary notes that will be going along with that episode so if you want to read something to go along with it and have some reminders, then they will be going up on our media page, brailists.org/media, where you can find both the recording and those additional notes.