READING PASSAGE 1

*You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 1–13**, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.*

Louis Braille

Early Life and Blindness

Louis Braille was born in 1809 in the small French village of Coupvray. His father was a harness maker (a leather craftsman), and from a young age Louis liked to play in his father's workshop. Tragically, at the age of three, Louis injured his eye with an awl (a sharp tool used for making holes in leather). The wound became infected and the infection spread to his other eye, leaving him completely blind by age five. Growing up blind in the early 19th century was extremely challenging, but Louis's parents were determined to help him lead a normal life. He proved to be a bright and creative child, and eventually earned a scholarship to attend the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris. At that time, the few books available for blind readers had raised embossed print letters, which were bulky and difficult to read by touch. Louis was frustrated by how slowly he had to read under this system. He dreamed of a better way for blind people to read and write independently.

Inventing the Braille System

As a student at the Institute, Louis Braille began studying different ways of creating tactile writing – systems of raised marks on paper that could be read by touch. He learned of a code of raised dots and dashes devised by a French army captain for soldiers to share messages silently at night (this night writing inspired Louis greatly). After years of experimentation, he finally developed a new system at age 15. Braille's invention used a six-dot cell – six raised dots arranged in two columns of three – to represent letters and symbols. By using different combinations of the six dots, he could create 63 possible patterns, each standing for a letter of the alphabet or a short word. This six-dot tactile code was elegant in its simplicity: it was compact and could be read quickly with the fingertip. Louis Braille had essentially made it possible for blind people to read and write efficiently by touch, a revolutionary breakthrough. He even extended his dot system to cover musical notation, allowing blind students to read and write music as well.

Initial Skepticism and a Young Girl's Tribute

At first, many people did not believe that Louis's new dot system would really work or be practical. Sighted teachers at the Institute were accustomed to the old embossed-letter method and some feared that if blind students could read and write on their own, the sighted teachers might no longer be needed. Indeed, after an early director who supported Braille retired, a new school director even banned the use of Braille's dot code for a time, worried that blind students were becoming "too independent". Nevertheless, Braille's students and friends continued to use his system in secret, convinced of its value. A turning point came thanks to a public musical performance. One day, a young girl who had been blind since birth played the piano beautifully at a concert – delighting the audience. After the applause, the girl stood up and announced that everyone should thank Louis Braille, "who had made it possible for her to learn music and to play the piano." Her ability to read music through Braille's dot system had enabled her to become a skilled pianist. This powerful testimony showed skeptics that Braille's invention truly opened up opportunities for the blind. The success of Braille's system could no longer be denied.

Braille's Reflections and Legacy

When Louis Braille's friends rushed to tell him about the girl's moving tribute, they found him sick in bed – Braille had been suffering from tuberculosis, the illness that would soon claim his life. Upon hearing what happened at the concert, Louis was overcome with emotion and began to cry. "This is the third time in my life that I have cried," he told his friends. "The first time was when I became blind. The second was when I first heard about 'night writing.' And now I am crying because I know that my life has not been a failure." A few days later, Louis Braille died in Paris in 1852 at the age of 43. At the time of his passing, his writing system had still not been officially adopted by the authorities, and his death initially went almost unnoticed in the press. However, Braille's legacy would soon shine through. Just two years after his death, the Braille dot system was finally endorsed at his former school in Paris and began to spread. In 1878, an international congress on blind education officially recognized Braille's code, and over the following decades it was gradually accepted worldwide as the standard method of reading and writing for the blind.

Today, millions of blind or visually impaired people around the globe use Braille, and the system has been adapted into nearly every language. Over time, Braille's code has seen various modifications and extensions – for example, special contractions were developed for faster reading, and new symbols were added for mathematics and scientific notation – but it still fundamentally relies on the six-dot matrix that Louis invented. In fact, Braille's basic system remains "virtually unchanged to this day," a testament to the brilliance of his design. Louis Braille's innovation truly "opened the doors of knowledge to all those who cannot see," and his six raised dots continue to empower blind individuals to read, write, and participate fully in literature, education, music, and everyday life.

Sources

Penny Rosenblum, *Paths to Literacy – The Story of Louis Braille*
Imperial County Office of Education – *The Story of Louis Braille: Inventor of the Braille Code*
Louis Braille – Wikipedia

Compiled, formatted, and lightly proofread by ZYZ Reading Walks.