Handbook for Transcribing Navajo Braille By Carol Begay Green



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Table of Contents

1.1 The Alphabet	3
1.2 The Vowel Signs	3
2.1 Capitalization.	4
2.2 Punctuation	5
2.3 quotations	5
3.1 Numbers	5

Background & Acknowledgements

This braille code was developed in an effort to make the Navajo language more readily accessible and easier to read for anyone of any age or nationality. It came in a question posed to Judith Dixon who at that time was with the Library of Congress and Francis Mary DeAndrea who was then president of the Braille Authority of North America. I asked the question at a Getting in Touch with Literacy conference in Rhode Island in 2013. I myself am half Navajo and have been studying Navajo off and on since I permanently moved to the southwest in 1989. I took my first Navajo language class at Northern Arizona University from Irene Silentman. At that time I could see and was more or less considered low vision. In 2013 I was in my 3rd year as a teacher of the blind and visually impaired in Farmington, New Mexico when I inquired after a braille code for Navajo, my braille fluency was building along with my students' abilities. I have kept most of the Navajo language books I have acquired over the years as an elementary teacher on the Navajo Nation and from Navajo language classes. I can no longer see them and had a desire to continue to learn and study Navajo as I have yet to master this very difficult language that my father was raised speaking before going to boarding school and is the only language my grandparents speak. Although I may never achieve this desire to master the language, I have always been good at reading it and in desire to read it and write it, I thought it would be of benefit to others as well. Although I had not begun creating the code right away, I contacted Francis Mary DeAndrea in the Spring of 2015 and she recommended that I contact Dr. Robert Englebertsen of Rice University in Houston, Texas who is a linguistics professor and braille user. As we consulted through the summer, we had a code by August and I presented it to the Navajo Nation Board of Dine Education in September of 2015. It was approved in October the same year.

I hope this handbook is useful to those in the community who will use it to teach others and prepare materials for those who will enjoy learning a beautiful and rich language that is beginning to disappear from among us. It is my hope and desire that someone who is a braille user may add to the preservation of this language among our people and others. I would like to thank Margaret Bateman for encouraging me to develop this code and my team at Farmington Municipal Schools. I would also like to thank my family for their support particularly my husband Kevin Green Sr. who works tirelessly behind the scenes. He is the wind beneath my wings.

Carol Begay Green

1.1 The Alphabet

Navajo was not traditionally a written language. It became a written language in the 1930s and uses the Latin Alphabet. The consonants with their braille equivalents are as follows:

b	:	h	:.	m	••	W	•
с	••	j	.:	n		Х	••
d	•	k	• •	8	:	у	:
g	::	1	:	t	:	Z	:

In addition to the consonants, there are additional symbols used in Navajo. One is another consonant called the Slash L. the sound is made by voicing while the tip of the tongue is touching the back of the teeth and the back of the tongue is pressed against the roof of the mouth.

Another symbol is the glottal stop. It looks like the apostrophe. Navajo grammar does not use the apostrophe so for Navajo braille we will use the same symbol as for apostrophe but call it the glottal stop. this convention is a quick stop of the air in the throat.

. Following is the print braille and dot equivalents.

ł	••	Dots 1456
د	N	Dot 3

1.2 Vowel Signs

In Navajo there are three types of vowels: the low tone, the high tone & the nasal tone. These are differentiated by symbols as well as tones. The high tone has a slight raised pitch whereas the low tone remains neutral. The nasal tone is achieved by anunciating the vowel in the nasal cavity is either a raised pitch or neutral tone.

Low	••••••••••	Low		Low	Braille	Low	Braille	
Tone		Tone		Tone		Tone		
a	•	e	•	Ι	•	0	:	
High	••••••••••	Dots	High &	Braille	Dots	Low	Braille	Dots
Tone			Nasal			&		
						Nasal		
á	::	12356	á	::	46	ą	•	46
					12356			1
é	:	2346	é	::	46	ę		46
					2346			15
í	•	34	í	••	46	į		46
					34			24
ó	:	••••••	Ó	••	46	Q	•••	46
					346			135

This table summarizes the Bowel Signs in Navajo print, braille & the dots:

Please notice that in order to create a Nasal Vowel there is the use of a "Nasal Indicator" in Navajo Braille. These are dots 4 & 6. It can be used before either the low tone or high tone vowels. Also, as Navajo is a southwestern language, we will use the same braille configurations we use for American Spanish braille for the accented vowels. Dr. Englebretson called this positive transference. We also thought it would be useful to simplify the use of the braille code for a variety of learners who may find it difficult to remember more symbols. This is also why we are using the Nasal Indicator instead of creating more symbols.

Navajo Braille is uncontracted as are most languages other than English in the United States. This also keeps it simple to read and to transcribe. Below is an exercise to practice transcribing Navajo words into braille. As with Unified English Braille, you braille what you see using the braille code provided.

Exercise A:		
Print	Braille	English
'ayęęzhii		egg
Bilasáana	••••••••••	apple
'alóós		rice
łééchąą'í		dog
Mósí		cat
	· · · · ·	

2.1 Capitalization

In Navajo Braille we use the same symbol for capitalization as in UeB, which is dot 6. However, I discovered as I have been using the code, that we also follow the same rule as in braille that you never separate the capitalization sign (dot6) from the letter being capitalized. This is sometimes a challenge as a glottal stop frequently accompanies the first letter of a word such as baby. See the following example.

Print	· · · · · · · · ·	English
'Awéé'		Baby

We will practice transcribing the following phrases together.

Exercise B:

Tségháhoodz1nd66'
From Window Rock
Tséyi'di
At Canyon de Chelly

T'áá Diné Bikéyah

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Navajo Homeland
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2.2 Punctuation

As with UeB, you braille what you see. Therefore, Navajo Braille will use the same punctuation symbols used in UEB. These will not change. I will not go through all of the punctuation symbols here but we will complete a few sentences together so that you will see that the punctuation is the same.

Exercise C:

Haash wolyé?
What is your name?
Háadi 'ółta'?
Where do you go to school?
Dooda'Á Doo da'ałhoshda.
No! They are not sleeping.

2.3 Quotations

There are no low symbols in Navajo Braille aside from the glottal stop. Dot 6 is used for capitalization as we have overviewed and any punctuation you see will follow UeB symbols. The same for quotation marks. We will use the quotation marks used in UeB. We will complete the following sentences together.

Exercise D:

"Yá'átééh shicheiiÁ" níigo Jáanii bił hózhó.
8.38.87.57
"Hello Grandpa!" Johnny says and it is good with Grandpa.
Níť čé magí ałdó', "Y1'1t44h shicheii!"n7igo haadz77.
Then the monkey also says, "Hello Grandpa!"
"D7kw77sh bee h0⊨?" n7igo shik'is.
8.3.1.4.1.1.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4.4
"How many do you have?" asked my friend.

3.1 Numbers

Just as in UEB, Navajo Braille will use the same rules for numbers. The Numeric Indicator will be followed by literary numbers. The same rules used for UeB will be used with punctuation and numbers. We will complete the following exercise together.

Exercise E.
Łíí' 2 ligai dóó libá.
2 white and gray horses.
Dibé 4 daalgai.
4 white sheep
2 dila' ołkił.
2 o'clock

Contact Information

I hope this short handbook is helpful to you as you attempt to transcribe Navajo for others. It is the same as UeB, in that you braille what you see using the code foundation. If you have any questions or comments on what more could be added to this handbook to assist in transcribing the Navajo Braille Code please contact me:

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