A FREE GUIDE FROM STORY DESIGN LAB

The Connection Gap

Why what you mean isn't always what your reader receives

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STORY DESIGN LAB
STORIES THAT CAPTIVATE & COMPEL

WHERE WE LEFT OFF

If you just watched *Learning to Speak Your Clients' Language*, you already know the heart of what I was teaching back in 2018: a virtual assistant's job isn't just to write well, it's to write in a way that sounds like the client and says what the client actually means. I still believe every word of that. But in the eight years since I recorded that training, I've come to realize it was pointing at something much bigger than ghostwriting or client voice.

You know exactly what you meant when you wrote something, and yet your reader understood something entirely different. Somewhere between your brain and the page, the meaning shifted, and that shift shows up in almost every kind of writing I've ever done or taught:

- A virtual assistant writes copy that is technically correct but doesn't sound anything like the client.
- A business owner carefully explains every feature of an offer, and the audience is still left wondering why they should care.
- A marketer creates an ad that accurately describes the service but completely misses the worry that's actually driving the customer.
- A novelist knows a character so intimately that they feel like family, and readers still say, "I just don't connect with them."

Those look like four very different writing problems, but underneath them is the same challenge: what exists in your head is not automatically what exists in your reader's experience. I call the distance between those two things **the Connection Gap**, and once you learn to see it and close it, it will change almost everything you write.

The question underneath it all

In the years after that 2018 training, I built a business around words. I wrote blog posts and website copy, ghostwrote content in other people's voices, developed marketing strategy, and studied advertising, trying to understand why one version of a message catches someone's attention while another quietly disappears into the scroll. Over and over, I watched tiny wording changes alter what an audience noticed, understood, trusted, and acted on.

Eventually I realized I wasn't working in a dozen unrelated areas at all. I kept solving variations of a single problem: how do you translate what matters inside one mind into language that can matter to another? That question sits underneath nearly everything I do now through Story Design Lab, and it's the reason I wrote this guide.

THE BIG IDEA

What Is the Connection Gap?

The Connection Gap is the distance between what the writer knows, intends, or means and what the reader actually perceives from the words on the page.

That sounds simple, I know, but it rarely is. Every writer carries an enormous amount of invisible context that shapes what they put on the page, and the reader has access to none of it unless it makes it into the words. So good communication requires more than accurate information. It requires you to keep asking one deceptively simple question:

> *What does my reader actually have access to?*

That question is where connection starts. The six sections that follow look at the places the gap most often hides, from the context you forget you're carrying to the conclusions you explain a little too thoroughly. Each one ends with a short exercise you can try on something you're writing right now, and each includes a brief note on how the same principle shows up in fiction, because that's where I eventually found myself staring at this problem again.

01
Watch for Invisible Context

Most of the time, the Connection Gap opens because the writer knows something the reader doesn't, and the writer has known it so long that they've stopped noticing it's there. Think about everything you carry into a single piece of client work:

- You know what the client meant in last week's meeting.
- You know why the business owner hates a particular turn of phrase.
- You know exactly what the product does and how it's different from the competition.
- You know what happened before the email thread you're replying to even started.

The reader only knows what made it onto the page. You know what "the launch" means because you've been discussing it for three weeks, but the audience seeing that phrase for the first time doesn't have those three weeks. You know the business changed its process this spring, but the customer is still working from last year's information. You know exactly why the client never wants the word *cheap* anywhere near their marketing, but the new contractor they just hired has no idea.

Invisible context becomes dangerous when the meaning of your message depends on it. The fix, though, isn't to dump everything you know onto the page, because that creates its own kind of confusion and clutter. Closing the gap means giving readers the *right* context, the pieces that actually shape how they understand the words in front of them.

TRY THIS: THE INVISIBLE CONTEXT AUDIT

Take a blog paragraph, email, social post, or sales page you're working on and ask yourself, *What do I know here that the reader doesn't?* Then sort your answers into two piles. The first pile is what the reader genuinely needs, because without it they may misunderstand the message. The second pile is what's useful to you as the writer but would only add clutter for the reader. Only the first pile belongs on the page.

IN FICTION

You know why your character goes quiet whenever someone mentions home. Your reader only knows that she went quiet. Whether that silence means anything to the reader or not depends entirely on what you've already put on the page.

02
Information Isn't Significance

One of the easiest writing mistakes to make is assuming that if we give readers the information, they'll automatically understand why it matters. Sometimes they will, but more often they won't, because the significance of a piece of information comes from the person receiving it, not the person writing it.

Consider a simple sentence like *We offer same-day scheduling.* To the business owner, that line might mean they run an efficient operation. To the customer whose furnace stopped working on a January night, it means something far more urgent: *I might not have to sleep in a freezing house tonight.* The words didn't change at all, but the significance did.

The same thing happens with the facts clients love most. When a client tells you, "We've been in business for 25 years," you could simply report it, and it really is an accomplishment. But the more important question is why the customer should care. Twenty-five years might mean stability, or deep local knowledge, or that this company has weathered enough disasters to know exactly what to do when something goes wrong. Those are very different meanings, and the one you choose shapes what you emphasize, which examples you reach for, and what evidence you put on the page.

Significance is also personal and situational. An email announcing that *the deadline has been moved to Friday* could be wonderful news, terrible news, or entirely irrelevant news, and the sentence itself can't tell you which. If the reader desperately needed two more days, it's a gift. If they already rearranged childcare to hit the original deadline, or Friday is the day they leave for vacation, it complicates everything. People connect with information when they understand why it matters to *them*, whether that's because it solves a problem, offers relief, threatens something important, protects a relationship, challenges how they see themselves, or saves them time, money, or embarrassment.

And sometimes the gap isn't only about why something matters, but what readers believe it means in the first place. Tell a client list that you're *restructuring your packages*, and you may mean you've simplified your offers, while a good portion of your readers quietly hear *price increase*.

TRY THIS

Take one factual sentence from something you're currently writing and ask, *Why does this matter to the person receiving it, right now?* Not to "people" in general, but to this particular reader in this particular moment. Then go one layer deeper and ask whether you've given them enough on the page to understand that significance for themselves.

IN FICTION

A city can explode on page one and make a reader wonder why. A woman can glance at the second coffee mug on her kitchen table and make that same reader grieve for someone they've never met. The explosion is bigger, but the mug carries personal significance.

03

Perspective Changes What People Notice

Two people can look at exactly the same thing and notice completely different things, and that difference has an enormous effect on how writing lands.

Imagine four people opening the same brand-new website. The designer immediately notices the typography and visual hierarchy. The business owner asks whether it *feels* like the company. The customer is scanning for the price, and the salesperson is looking for the call to action. It's one website, but it's four entirely different experiences, because each person's attention goes first to whatever matters most to them.

This matters because writers tend to communicate from their own perspective rather than the reader's. You know what's interesting about a service because you helped build it, but your audience may be drawn to something else entirely. You know what makes your client brilliant because you've spent hours talking with them, but the stranger scrolling past on Instagram is noticing something much more immediate, like whether this has anything to do with the problem sitting on their desk today.

TRY THIS: THE PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

Take a piece of writing you've been working on and ask, *What do I notice first, because I already know this subject so well?* Then step back and ask, *What would my intended reader notice first?* The difference between those two answers is very often exactly where the Connection Gap is hiding.

IN FICTION

Send a pampered princess and a trained assassin into the same firelit room. She notices the plush chair and the steaming tea; he notices the curtains he could hide behind and the teacups that would rattle if he bumped the table. Same room, two completely different rooms, and the reader learns who each character is from what they notice.

04
Voice Is More Than Vocabulary

When I first taught *Learning to Speak Your Clients' Language*, much of the challenge was learning to recognize what made one person sound like themselves. That's still true, but I understand now that voice goes far deeper than word choice. It also includes what someone notices, what they emphasize, what they joke about and what they refuse to say, how formal or casual they are, how much they explain or leave unsaid, which comparisons come naturally to them, how directly they make a point, and what they assume their audience already knows.

That's why copying a client's favorite phrases rarely makes a piece sound like them. To really capture someone's voice, you need to understand how they think about the subject, not just how they talk about it.

It's also why the labels clients give you are a starting point rather than an answer. A client might tell you, "I want this to sound warm." But what does *warm* actually look like in the way this person communicates? Maybe they use contractions and short personal stories. Maybe they avoid jargon, reach for gentle humor, or write as though they're speaking to one person instead of addressing a crowd. Warm means something different for every client, and you can't emulate it until you've found the evidence underneath the label. (The Voice Evidence Worksheet at the end of this guide will walk you through exactly that.)

> **TRY THIS**
>
> Ask yourself, *If someone else wrote this same information, what would the reader understand differently?* It's a surprisingly useful question for clients, brands, and fictional characters alike, because whatever changes is precisely what this voice is contributing.

> **IN FICTION**
>
> *Strong character voice is the reason a reader can often tell who's speaking even without a dialogue tag. It isn't a set of catchphrases. It's a whole way of seeing the world, rendered in language.*

05
Evidence, Not Assertions

One of the most useful lessons I've learned across copywriting, marketing, editing, and fiction is that readers connect more strongly when they can see the evidence for themselves.

Consider a line you've probably read on a hundred websites: *We provide exceptional customer service.* That's a conclusion, and it asks the reader to simply take your word for it. Now compare it with this: *Calls are answered by a real person, and most service requests receive a response within one business day.* The first version asks the reader to believe you. The second gives them something concrete to evaluate, so they can reach the conclusion on their own, and **a conclusion people reach themselves tends to be one they trust.**

The tricky part is that assertions feel efficient when you're the one writing them. You already know the service is exceptional, so the word *exceptional* seems to say it all. But that knowledge lives in your head, not on the page, which makes an unsupported assertion one more version of the Connection Gap.

> **TRY THIS**
>
> Find one claim in your current piece of writing and ask, *What conclusion do I want the reader to reach here?* Then ask, *What evidence have I actually given them to guide them there?* If the honest answer is "not much," replace the label with one specific, verifiable detail.

> **IN FICTION**
>
> *"He was nervous" hands the reader a conclusion. A character rereading the same sentence three times because he can't absorb a single word gives the reader something to experience, and lets them recognize the nerves for themselves.*

06
Leave the Reader Something to Do

The previous section was about giving readers too little to work with. This one is about the opposite problem, and it's sneakier, because it usually comes from good intentions: explaining everything.

When writers become afraid of being misunderstood, they often start assembling every conclusion for the reader in advance, making sure nothing is left to interpretation. The trouble is that when nothing is left to infer, notice, or connect, the reader has nothing left to do, and people tend to engage far less with a message they're only allowed to receive. It sounds counterintuitive to say that over-explaining widens the Connection Gap, but it does, because you've removed the reader's chance to participate in the conversation.

Good communication gives readers enough evidence to understand the intended meaning without treating them as though they can't make the connection themselves. It is a balancing act, and I won't pretend otherwise: too little context creates confusion, while too much explanation creates distance. The sweet spot is where the evidence is sufficient and the reader gets to arrive at the conclusion on their own.

TRY THIS

Read through your draft and look for the sentences that restate what the previous sentence already made clear, the *in other words* moments and the summaries of what you just showed. For each one, ask, *Could my reader already get here from the evidence on the page?* If the answer is yes, try cutting it and see whether the message actually gets stronger.

IN FICTION

Readers often feel closest to the characters they've had to figure out a little. A character who says "I'm fine" while very carefully setting a cracked cup back on its saucer doesn't need a narrator to explain that she isn't.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

A Before and After

Here's what closing the Connection Gap can look like on a single piece of client copy. Imagine you're a VA writing the homepage blurb for a small bookkeeping firm called Maple & Main.

BEFORE

At Maple & Main Bookkeeping, we provide comprehensive bookkeeping services for small businesses. With over 15 years of experience, our team delivers exceptional service and accurate financial reporting. We offer monthly reconciliation, payroll support, and tax preparation assistance. Contact us today to learn more!

Nothing in that paragraph is wrong. It's accurate, professional, and almost completely interchangeable with every other bookkeeping website on the internet.

AFTER

If your receipts live in a shoebox and tax season makes your stomach drop, you're exactly who we built Maple & Main for. Every month, we reconcile your accounts and send you a one-page summary in plain English, so you always know where your money went and what's coming next. When April arrives, your books are already done, and your accountant gets everything in one tidy folder instead of a frantic weekend of digging. We've been doing this for small businesses for fifteen years, which means we've already seen most of the messes you're worried about, and we know how to clean them up. Book a free 20-minute call, and we'll tell you honestly whether we're a good fit.

What changed

IN THE BEFORE	IN THE AFTER	PRINCIPLE
"Comprehensive bookkeeping services"	The shoebox of receipts and the dread of tax season	**Information isn't significance**
"Exceptional service and accurate reporting"	A monthly one-page summary in plain English	**Evidence, not assertions**
"Over 15 years of experience"	"We've already seen most of the messes you're worried about"	**Information isn't significance**
Opens with the company	Opens with the reader's situation	**Perspective changes what people notice**
Generic, formal, could be anyone	Plain, a little wry, sounds like a person	**Voice is more than vocabulary**
—	Never says "we're reliable" or "we're friendly"	**Leave the reader something to do**

The most important change doesn't show up in the table at all. Every specific detail in the after version, from the one-page summary to the accountant's tidy folder, came from asking the client questions. All of that evidence already existed; it was simply sitting in the client's head as invisible context. Your job was to find the pieces the reader needed and get them onto the page. And of course, the voice here is just one possibility. A different client might want something more polished or more playful, which is exactly where the worksheet at the end of this guide comes in.

BEFORE YOU HIT SEND

The Connection Gap Audit

Before you send, publish, post, or submit something, run it through these questions. There's one for each section of this guide.

Start here: What am I actually trying to communicate? Can I state the central point cleanly in a sentence or two?

- [ ] **1 · INVISIBLE CONTEXT**
  What do I know that my reader doesn't, and which of those things do they genuinely need in order to understand this?

- [ ] **2 · SIGNIFICANCE**
  Why does this matter to this particular reader right now, and could they reasonably read it to mean something I didn't intend?

- [ ] **3 · PERSPECTIVE**
  What will my reader notice first, and is that where I've put the thing that matters most?

- [ ] **4 · VOICE**
  Does this sound like the person or brand whose name is on it, or does it sound like anyone at all?

- [ ] **5 · EVIDENCE**
  Where am I asking the reader to believe a conclusion instead of showing them something they can evaluate?

- [ ] **6 · PARTICIPATION**
  Where am I explaining something the reader could already reach on their own from what's on the page?

And finally: Am I writing from what I know, or from what my reader can actually perceive?

The Voice Evidence Worksheet

This is the practical heart of *Learning to Speak Your Clients' Language*, updated with everything I've learned since. Use it whenever you start writing for a new client, or whenever a client tells you a draft "doesn't quite sound like me."

Before you begin, gather three to five samples of the client's own unedited communication: emails they wrote themselves, voice memos, recorded calls, social captions, or anything they've written without help. Polished, professionally written copy is less useful here, because it may already be someone else's version of their voice.

For each prompt, write down actual evidence: a quoted phrase, a specific example, or a pattern you can point to. Resist the urge to write adjectives. "Friendly" is a label; "opens every email by asking about your weekend" is evidence.

CLIENT _____ **DATE** _____ **SAMPLES REVIEWED** _____

Part 1 · How they sound

01 Words and phrases they use often

02 Words or phrases they avoid or dislike

03 How they usually open an email or post

04 How they usually close or sign off

05 Sentence feel: short and punchy, long and flowing, or a mix

06 Formality: contractions, slang, industry jargon

Part 2 · How they think

07 **Where humor shows up, and what kind**

08 **What they talk about first when describing their work**

09 **What they explain in detail, and what they skip**

10 **Stories, comparisons, or examples they keep reaching for**

11 **How directly they make a point or ask for something**

12 **What they assume their audience already knows**

Part 3 · From label to evidence

13 **The label they use for their voice ("warm," "professional," "bold")**

14 **The evidence underneath that label**

★ **To finish, complete this sentence in your own words:**

This client thinks about their work as...

If you can answer that clearly, you're no longer imitating their phrases. You're writing from the way they see the world, and that's when clients start telling you, "This sounds exactly like me."

THE REST OF THE STORY

Where This Led Me

Years after I first taught virtual assistants how to speak their clients' language, I ran into the very same problem in a place I never expected: my own novel.

I knew my fourteen-year-old main character intimately. I created the first version of him when I was about twelve, so by the time I was revising his story, I'd known him for roughly thirty years. I knew what frightened him, what made him laugh, which questions he couldn't leave alone, how he loved the people around him, and why he kept making terrible decisions for excellent reasons. My early readers knew none of that. They liked the story, and they wanted to know what happened next, but they weren't connecting with him. I had all the context, and my readers didn't. I was standing on the wrong side of the Connection Gap.

That realization sent me into a much deeper study of point of view, interiority, embodiment, attention, relationships, reader inference, and voice, and eventually that work became a framework I call **Emotional Ignition**. Emotional Ignition is the point where a reader stops merely observing a story and begins investing in the specific human experience unfolding on the page. A hook makes readers ask what happens next; Emotional Ignition makes them care who it happens to, and it's what keeps them turning pages long after the hook has done its job.

> *How do you take something that matters inside one mind and make it legible enough to matter inside another?*

At its heart is the same question I've been asking in one form or another since 2018.

If You're Writing a Book

A book is where the Connection Gap gets widest, simply because the writer is carrying so much more context. Whether you're writing a novel, a business book, or the story of your own life, you know far more than will ever fit on the page, and the real challenge is choosing which pieces the reader needs and getting them there in a way that makes them care.

If you write fiction

You know far more about your character than any reader ever will: their history, their relationships and fears, their private associations, their wounds and beliefs. The challenge is understanding how those things become visible at the line level without dumping the entire character profile onto page one. That's exactly what I explore through Emotional Ignition, and if you'd like to dig in, here's where to start:

> **READ** Emotional Ignition: How Do You Make Readers Care on Page One?

> **LISTEN** My conversation with Jeff Elkins on The Dialogue Doctor Podcast

> **COMING SOON** The Emotional Ignition First-Page Audit (newsletter subscribers get it first)

> **FOLLOW** My writing journey and craft essays on Substack

If you're writing nonfiction or memoir

The gap shows up a little differently here, but it's every bit as real. In a business book, you've spent years learning lessons your reader is encountering for the first time, and the expertise that makes you worth reading can also make it hard to remember what a newcomer actually needs to know. In memoir, you lived every moment of the story, so the people, places, and feelings are vivid to you in a way that simply isn't automatic for someone meeting them on the page.

I work with fiction, nonfiction, and memoir writers as a book coach and developmental editor, helping them find the story underneath their experience and shape it into something readers can genuinely connect with. If you're writing a book, or you've been thinking about writing one for years, I'd love to hear about it! You can reach me at **liz@storydesignlab.com**.

ABOUT STORY DESIGN LAB

I'm Liz Woodiwiss, a writer, developmental editor, book coach, and marketing strategist.

I started Story Design Lab because I wanted to help business owners identify and tell the story behind their business. Over time, that work grew into developmental editing and coaching, helping authors design and write the stories they want to tell. On the surface, copywriting, ghostwriting, content strategy, advertising, and editing novels can look like very different jobs, but my work has always come back to the same thing:

making meaning transferable.

Helping a client sound like themselves. Helping an audience understand why something matters. Helping a writer put enough of a character, or of their own life, onto the page that a reader can begin to care.

Go Deeper

Most of what I publish on the Story Design Lab blog and newsletter is written with fiction writers in mind, but every principle in it is drawn from my eight years in marketing, copywriting, and content development, and nearly all of it transfers cleanly between fiction, nonfiction, and business writing. That's really the whole point of Story Design Lab. If this guide helped you see your own writing a little differently, the newsletter is where I keep exploring what makes words actually land with the people reading them, whether those words belong on a sales page, in a client's inbox, or in chapter one.

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