

4150 Spring 2011

Be prepared to discuss these points in class next week:

Tufte says that simplicity of reading derives from the context of detailed and complex information, properly arranged. To clarify, add detail. Do you agree? What does a reader do when there is not enough detail? How does the detail help? Why is too much detail sometimes a problem?

According to Tufte, the Gustav Klutskis poster is a “data display.” He says it gives the viewer the capacity to compare and sort through detail. Isn’t the poster about a political message, instead of giving the viewer lots of “data” to look at? Why aren’t all the little hands distracting?

What does he say is the advantage of the mesh maps on pages 40 and 41 over chloropleth maps? Can you find an example of a chloropleth (traditional) map that is confusing or misleading because of the problems Tufte is talking about?

The author says the names inscribed in the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial serve three functions – what are they? Can you think of another list in which items serve three functions at once?

On p. 46 Tufte shows a “stem and leaf plot” as an example of something that can be read on two levels. What is the macro reading? What is the micro reading? Although a lot of key information seems to be missing, what surprising thing can one learn about the heights of volcanoes?

At the bottom of that page is a train schedule. What time of day do the trains run most often? What feature of the design allows you to see this quickly? Which train schedule would you prefer: the one at the bottom of page 46 or the one at the top of page 47? Why? How would you improve either of these schedules?

Tufte wrote this book in the context of print, rather than online, culture. Is the following passage more or less true than when he wrote *Envisioning Information*?

“Visual displays rich in data are not only an appropriate and proper complement to human capabilities, but also such designs are frequently optimal. If the visual task is contrast, comparison, and choice—as so often it is—then the more relevant information within eyespan, the better. Vacant, low-density displays, the dreaded posterization of data spread over pages and pages, require viewers to rely on visual memory—a weak skill—to make a contrast, a comparison, a choice.

(Tufte misuses the term *posterization* here, though he is trying to describe images that are data-thin like a traditional poster.)

Tufte concludes with some observations about simplicity. When does he say it is good? When is it bad?