Edward Tufte is more than a little obsessed with presenting information in meaningful and aesthetically pleasing visualizations. His popularity among scholars and graphic designers is easy to understand, as he set the standard for readability and communication of ideas through data visualizations. His critiques of many common visualizations include accusations of overcrowding, over-busyness, and a tendency for designers to showcase their graphic design talents instead of focusing on data presentation. He decries "chartjunk" -- unnecessary graphical elements that add flourish at the expense of pith and readability. He advocates high "data ink" (ink/space dedicated to conveying meaning) to chartjunk ratios, in charts, and even suggests reducing the overall data ink use to the minimum when possible or appropriate. The examples he points out of chartjunk frequently border on (or trespass well into) the absurd.

The map of the US population by geography (pp.156-7)(prepared by the US Census is a great example of using simple visual cues to convey large amounts of information. It is a black map of the US with white dots to represent population centers. The map is not cluttered with extraneous shadings, patterns, graphics, or chartjunk, yet it contains more information than it appears to at first glance. The major population centers are immediately recognizable, as are population centers in the middle of low population territory. What can't be seen at first are the smallest towns. Upon closer inspection, both the subtlety of the graphic and its quality are more apparent. Tiny dots representing equally tiny towns can be seen scattered throughout the map, both around the larger population centers and in the middle of what at first appears to be blackness. Just as non-residents might not notice those small towns, they are easy to miss on the visualization. The relativity of scale of dots allows the map to retain its natural geographical boundaries in very high-density urban areas – a wise design decision.

A digital version of this visualization would be relatively simple to construct, and if it could be made into a video, showing the growth of cities and the nation over the past 230 years.

Tufte claims that geographical barriers are apparent from this map, and to a certain extent, he is correct. However, as an educational tool, it could be very helpful for younger students to view this visualization on a topographical map, so that they could come to the conclusion for themselves that cities spring up around rivers and coastlines, and don't among mountains, and then question why that would be. As it is, this map confirms what most educated adults might guess, but it could serve as a valuable tool for educators.
Contrariwise, the chart shown on page 59, shown here with a different graph inside is the definition of distracting.

The original image had a fairly simple line-chart inside depicting (make a guess first)... fuel economy standards from 1978-1985. While the chart did accurately and plainly show the relative fuel economy standards, as well as the actual fuel consumption of the average car on the road at the time, it takes a few seconds to process the border before even noticing the contained chart. The red and green of the above graphic are jarring enough to call attention to themselves, but the plain, thin black lines of the original do not.
I (and the person who posted this image online) share a love for this particular border for its absurdity. The only appropriate use I can conceive would be in comparing the number of wives, slaves and possessions buried with national leaders over time. It is basically the graphical equivalent of the “Professional Clear Plastic Binder” that Calvin (of Calvin and Hobbes) puts a report into to mask its lack of substance.

Digitally, watered-down versions of this can be seen in thousands of Powerpoint presentations in the form of fancy transitions, ridiculous animations, and overly complicated (high chartjunk) graphs and charts.

In Envisioning Information, pages 68-69 show a series of small multiples, one in plain text and one as images, depicting how to draw characters of Latin and Japanese. The text version is something familiar to me since kindergarten, where I first began to learn writing, but the pictorial depiction is interesting both for the attention to detail, and the extent to which it over-delivers detail. The character (Ro) is shown being written in 30 frames. This over-attention to detail could be said to convey a Japanese cultural obsession with doing things the proper way (a notion that is famously satirized in several Japanese films).

Seeing the two side-by-side draws attention to the relative use of space – the entire Latin alphabet being described step by step in roughly 2”x4” and the construction of a single Japanese character occupying an entire page. Tufte describes the images as magical and mysterious, but leaves it to the reader to make a judgment about excess. The amount of information conveyed (brush angle, pressure level, brush holding technique, relative speed) is massive; it is more than any beginner who would be likely to be searching for a reference on how to write the kana character would be able to absorb at one time. Pith is a value Tufte espouses throughout his writing, but he seems to find no fault with this set of thirty images depicting a single character’s creation.