Commentary: Clutter is a Failure of Design: An Overview of 'Presenting Data and Information, a one-day course taught by Edward Tufte'
- Lynn Yarmey. (CCE/PAL)

With endless information to present, mandatory content and link locations to abide by and more incoming information to manage, website (re)design can easily slip to the end of the to-do list. However, the design of a website or any information presentation (posters, handouts, etc.) can greatly impact the accessibility and usability of the contents. Edward Tufte is a design expert currently on a teaching tour of the country (http://www.edwardtufte.com/). A Fall 2004 LTER DataBits Good Read summarized his phamphlet on "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint". I recently attended a one-day course by Tufte that was held in San Diego.

During the day, Tufte covered topics including the fundamentals of analytical thought and their translation to design, problems and solutions in website and presentation creation, goals of design and methods for maximizing the learning possibilities for information viewers. The foundation of his philosophy is that simplicity is the key to good design; detail and thoughtful organization provide an antidote to information overload. To maximize viewer engagement and information transmission, all contents should be pared down to the minimum pixels needed to understand the content. From font choices (sans-serifs are preferred, gil sans is recommended) to reducing dependence on extraneous boxes and limiting use of bold colors to where they are absolutely necessary, Tufte preaches a minimalist style to reduce visual clutter and enhance learning. He suggests adding details only to give credibility to the content and organizing content to provide the most information possible. For instance, rather than ordering a list alphabetically, try ordering it statistically (by relevance, from greatest to least size, etc) so that the list order becomes extra information about the

content and allows immediate comparisons. Tufte offers up the iPhone interface and the Google News website (http://news.google.com/) as examples of good design (flat, lots of content and not many extraneous pixels, etc.).

I found the course to be both helpful and thought provoking. Unfortunately it has been more difficult than expected to integrate what I learned into everyday activities; the skills of design take both time and finesse to put into practice!