

## The annotation layer

Now that we have learned about encodings, let's talk about the next layer in a data visualization, which is, I would say equally important to the encodings itself. It's what we usually call in the world of data visualization, the annotation layer, which is not a term that I invented. It's a term that I believe was invented in the graphics department of The New York Times.

What is the annotation layer? Well, the annotation layer is those text elements that we add to visualizations to either clarify the data, to highlight the most important data points in your chart or to put the data in context somehow. And this is a very important layer in any data visualization if you want to communicate effectively with the public. Let's suppose that you do a line chart, right? With tons of little data points and stuff and suddenly there is a spike in your line chart. Well, you better add a little note to that spike telling people, well, this event or this phenomenon happen at this particular point in time, and this is the reason why we have this sudden spike in our line chart. That's the annotation layer, that little note that you're putting there, that's the annotation layer at work. The annotation layer is also the intros that we write to our visualizations, the headlines that we write for our visualization. Those elements are incredibly important in data visualization.

As an example of how the annotation layer works, I would just like to show you this project by The Washington Post titled The Geography of Voting. It's basically a series of maps and graphs and charts showing county by county which counties have higher participation rates in elections or smaller participation rates in elections. The Washington Post designers could have limited themselves just to show you the data, right? Just to map the data, encode the data using colors and shapes and height and lengths and so on and so forth, but they did something else. On top of those charts, they added little notes here and there pointing out, you know, the counties with the highest rates, they counties with the lowest rates. "Hey, don't miss these data point, this is really, really important." Those little textural elements are crucial, are fundamental in data visualization. This is the annotation layer at work. Never, never miss the opportunity to explain something in your chart or in your graph, or in your map if you believe that that particular number, that particular point in time or that particular county on a map should not be missed by your readers. If you don't want them to miss it, just point it out and add a little bit of text next to it so people will focus their attention on that particular point.