Most of us have listened to a virtuoso speaker and wished that we, too, were natural-born orators. We do not realize, David Crystal claims, that any person with normal language skills can be an effective and eloquent public speaker if he or she devotes time and energy to proper preparation and rehearsal.

In “The Gift of the Gab,” Crystal, a freelance writer and lecturer, provides a practical primer on public speaking. Crystal acknowledges that content is not the subject of his book. Although he refers at length to speeches by Winston Churchill, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Barack Obama, he seems at times to endorse the view that when it comes to eloquence “T’ain’t what you say, it’s the way you say it.”

Focusing instead on technique, Crystal discusses the length of speeches, the venues in which they are delivered, and variations in the cultural experiences and expectations of audiences.

“The Gift of the Gab” also includes useful common sense recommendations about technical elements of eloquence. The “rule of three” (I was with you yesterday, I am with you today and I will be with you tomorrow), he writes, is one of the oldest rhetorical tricks of the trade, an almost certain winner — unless it’s overdone and calls attention to itself.

Crystal reminds aspiring public speakers to start with a story (perhaps a personal reflection) to establish the tone of the presentation and take the temperature of the audience. He urges speakers to use active verbs, avoid passive constructions and make sure that “voiced hesitations” (designed to send signals to listeners) and body language seem natural and maybe even spontaneous. And he warns against “power point karaoke,” where speakers put up texts on slides and proceed to bore audiences by reading them, word for word. Visual aids, Crystal emphasizes, “are good servants but bad masters.”

At its best, “The Gift of the Gab” provides solid and sound instruction in effective verbal communication. Crystal has much less to say, it seems to me, about “how eloquence works.” Eloquence, of course, is
difficult to define. Crystal, in fact, makes a good first stab at it. Eloquence, he writes, clearly expresses the convictions of the speaker, “displays features of artistry that go beyond the linguistic norms of everyday conversation,” and contains formulations and ideas that stick in the mind.

Delivery is essential to eloquence. But it is not sufficient. In my judgment, rhetoric “which leaves us with a taste for itself not for its substance” is not eloquence. King’s “I Have A Dream” speech is eloquent because its ringing phrases and cadences complement its message that in the United States every individual should be judged “not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character.”

In a sense, Crystal is right to insist that “everyone has got something to say — not just because we all have opinions about things but because life experiences differ.” The essence of that “something,” however, really matters.