

# [Machiavelli analysis essay](https://assignbuster.com/machiavelli-analysis-essay/)

Word Count: 1660″The term an refers to someone who is unscrupulous, cunning, cynical, and unprincipled”(Goods 1998). Many scholars agree that this particular adjective would have dismayed Niccolo Machiavelli, the man from whom the term is derived. In reality he has been attributed as being one of the brightest lights of the Italian Renaissance through his works as not only a writer, but also as an influential philosopher of history and political thought. His most famous work The Prince has been misunderstood due to the motives discussed and the blatantly honest language used. Many of his critics have condemned him for his pessimistic outlook of man as a whole and in doing so try to negate the bulk of his work. Yet even after over 470 years his works are still thought provoking and influential in the political arena. This paper looks at some of the influences that may have created such a man.

Machiavelli was born in Florence on May 3, 1469, a time of political upheaval and a strong political influence from the Roman Catholic Church. Although Machiavelli was never what would today be considered middle class, he himself states I was born poor and learned earlier to stint myself than to prosper(Gilbert 1961, 102). While the extent of this poverty is not known, it is known that his family owned land and was able to pay for his education. In fact, through some of his fathers letters we learn that he had an excellent education in Latin, arithmetic, history, and poetry, but that he was not well off enough to afford other more expensive forms of training (Gilbert 1961, 56). However, his financial hardship from earlier on seems to display itself in his cautious approach to most of his political activities. In fact, the lessons Machiavelli learned early on set a precedent of conservatism that carried on throughout his life. Machiavellis first position in government was given to him in 1498 at the age of twenty-nine. His position was that of Second Chancellor or Secretary and was the second most important paid position in the city (Gilbert 1961, 12). This position was advantageous in the fact that it provided him with experience dealing with both international negotiations and domestic business within the city. These early experiences were evident influences in his political beliefs and he himself commented on them occasionally. It was these early lessons in politics that not provided the foundation for his political beliefs, but they were also used for instructional purposes. In fact, Machiavelli used various early diplomatic missions as the basis for a short guideline he sent to the Florentine diplomat of Spain named Raffaelo Girolami. In this letter Machiavelli discussed not only what he had done but also how he could have improved (Gilbert 1961, 209). This letter was meant not only as advice for a particular situation but also as a learning aid to apply to all situations. We see from this and other letters like it that Machiavelli not only learned the theory behind politics but also continually refined his skill with each new challenge. Machiavelli demonstrated a great knowledge and insight regarding politics through his writings but more importantly he displayed a man who went through great effort to pay attention to details. Nowhere else is this fact more evident than in the advice and instructions that he imparted to less experienced government officials. His own advice states to write to those with whom you do business so clearly that when they have a letter of yours they may think they are there-in such detail it describes the thing to them(Gilbert 1961, 123). Not only does this apply to his beliefs in documentation, but also encourages them to pay close attention to details in order to supplement those writings. This type of statement was far from uncommon, in a large quantity of his letters to less experienced diplomats he advised them to go to the extreme of writing too much rather that too little (Gilbert 1961, 110). It was Machiavellis belief that details were only important if they were remembered and advised to always be aware of what is occurring.

Many of Machiavellis writings display the knowledge of one who has spent extensive time studying the past. More importantly, it can be proven that he spent a great amount of time learning about politicians and military leaders. Within his work, The Prince several historical figures are discussed to show how successful leaders had prospered with certain ideals; the most commonly used individuals were Cyrus, Ceasar, and Alexander. Through these three men Machiavelli demonstrates how learning from others in the past can help one achieve success in the present. In fact, one of his most powerful directives presented in The Prince, deals with emulating great men of the past and how others before had done so. Machiavelli states, imitate the other, who with persistence and craft, rather that with ability and prudence, make themselves(Gilbert 1961, 104) in an attempt to show that by following previously successful rulers one may learn from them ways to achieve success. He himself finds no shame in following the lead of others and defends his position by stating, anyone who reads the life of Cyrus written by Xenophon then realizes how important in the life of Scipio that imitation was to his glory and how much, in purity, goodness, humanity, and generosity, Scipio conformed to those characteristics (Jacobus 1998, 37). This not only defends his position but also shows exactly how this type of emulation can be beneficial to all peoples success. Along with his ability to learn from leaders of the past, Machiavelli also studied works of great thinkers. In his letters it becomes apparent through his use of quotes that he was well read. In fact, many of his letters contain quotes from Dante within them, indicating that he may have been a dominant influence in Machiavellis life. In a letter opening with I must discuss Public affair or be silent (Gilbert 1961, 103), Machiavelli quotes a passage from Inferno by Dante that shows how he has derived inspiration in his life from this author. The passage, How shall I go if you are fearful, who in my timidity are always my encouragement? (Gilbert 1961, 103) is used as an introduction for his discussion on continuing through hardship. While this reference could have been used purely for academic purposes, the continuing dialogue displays the thoughts of a man who truly believes in this statement. Another major factor in the development of Machiavellis beliefs were quite likely the fast changing political powers of the time combined with large amounts of corruption. Even before Machiavellis birth, corruption was evident in his native home of Florentine. History shows that Florentine was ruled by a man named Cosimo Medici (1360-1429), yet he held no public office, instead he ruled Florence by skillfully making certain that his favorites were elected to the chief offices in the city(Goods 1998). This form of political manipulation by wealthy citizens was common place in Machiavelli’s time and is still relevant today. By viewing this type of corruption and political power gathering Machiavelli could not help but understand this side of men. In accepting that mankind as a whole is not always the ideal, he was able to protect himself from the deceptions of other politicians and the common people. By doing so, Machiavelli was able to see that while providing for the people was a necessary and noble act, it could cause destruction when taken to an extreme. This thought process is clearly demonstrated in his quote “ he who gives up his own convenience for the convenience of others, only loses his own and from them gets no gratitude”(Gilbert 1961, 140).

Although Machiavelli was prudent with his political actions and displayed the characteristics of a logical person, he still possessed the heart of a poet. This part of his identity is most signified during his time of exile from the political life of Florentine when Machiavelli lived on his farm outside of the city. In several personal letters written during this period Machiavelli discussed several less demanding activities in his life. While much time was spent discussing general gossip of the day, he does mention quite often his love for poetry. In fact, one such letter contained “ I read of their tender passions and their loves, remember mine, enjoy myself awhile in that sort of dreaming”(Gilbert 1961, 141) while describing to a friend his daily activities. It can be argued that this type of leisure activity may have been part of his informal training into the realm of philosophy. It was during this time that he composed some of his more famous works, but he also composed a comedy called The Mandrake that displays the less serious and rigid side of Machiavelli. Although he does show himself to be as much of a dreamer as he was a politician, Machiavelli believed knew that emotion held no place in politics. He himself stated that in order to fairly rule calculation of what must be done in a given situation being unduly affected be passions or the contemporary conventions and ideals of right and wrong (Fleisher). Through personal experiences, education, and the lessons learned from the past Machiavelli was able to influence the world for generations with his political insights and theories. Even after 470 years his works still inspire and create debate as to the true nature of politics and the behavior of those that rule. While the true contributors to the development of these beliefs may never be truly known, the impact that they have had upon the world cannot be denied.