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online

In the Beginnings — From Cavemen to Cities

Clip: 8:03 · 14 words · 7 idioms & phrasal verbs · 2026-07-07



Cunk on Earth — a scene from today's lesson

1 Before You Watch

The story

Philomena Cunk is a fake TV reporter. She presents a history documentary with a very serious face — but she keeps saying silly things. In this clip, she tells the story of early humans: how they invented tools, fire, cave paintings and farming, up to the first city in Mesopotamia (Iraq today).

Why is it funny?

This is British 'deadpan' humour: saying silly things with a serious face. Cunk interviews REAL experts and asks them crazy questions ('Was Early Man made of beef or pork?'). The fun part: the experts stay polite and try to answer seriously. She also invents words: 'inventorers' (correct: inventors), 'clevernavts', 'expertists' — they sound real, but they are not. Don't learn these fake words — they are the joke!

Key words — know these before you watch:

early humans

tools

fire

cave painting

farming

city

Predict: Look at the keywords. What do you think this clip is about?

- A. A cooking show about ancient food
- B. The story of how early humans built the modern world
- C. A travel guide to Iraq

Background reading (1 minute)

Humans appeared millions of years ago. At first, they lived by hunting animals and collecting plants. Three inventions changed everything: **STONE TOOLS** (work became easier), **FIRE** (warmth, light at night, cooking) and **FARMING** (about 10,000 years ago — no more hunting, people could stay in one place). When people settled down, villages grew into cities. The first cities were in Mesopotamia (Iraq today). The clip tells exactly this story — but in a funny way.

2 While You Watch

First watch — NO subtitles. Just catch the main idea: Watch once (no subtitles). What is the main story of the clip?

- A. How humans slowly changed from cave life to city life
- B. How to paint animals on walls
- C. Why cows are dangerous

Second watch — subtitles ON. Answer the detail questions:

1. According to the clip, what did fire allow early humans to do?

- A. See at night and keep warm
- B. Cook pizza
- C. Travel to Iraq

2. What did early cave artists paint FIRST?

- A. Fight scenes with cows
- B. Their own hands
- C. Steven Spielberg

3. Which invention kept animals in one place?

- A. The wheel
- B. The fence
- C. The internet

4. Where was the first city?

- A. Egypt
- B. England
- C. Mesopotamia (Iraq today)

3 Transcript — notice the highlighted words

yellow = vocabulary to learn · **blue** = idioms & phrasal verbs

0:09 This is our planet.

0:11 Planet Earth.

0:13 It's a planet I'm literally on right now, and unless you're watching this on a long-haul flight or while falling off a building, **chances are** you are, too.

0:22 This is the incredible story of how **humankind transformed** our world from being a load of pointless nature like this to full of modern things like this...

0:32 ..and how it did it using nothing more than its hands...

0:37 ..and its imagination, and also tools and electricity and the internet.

0:42 It's a journey that'll take me to every corner of the globe money and pandemic travel restrictions would allow, getting up close to some of our species most **stunning achievements**.

0:54 And I'll be asking questions...

0:56 Who are you?

0:58 ..to leading academics, clevernauts and expertists who will help me unlock the mystery of human **civilisation**.

1:04 Why do they say it's a mystery how the pyramids were built when it's obviously just big bricks in a triangle?

1:12 This is not just the story of the planet we live in.

1:15 This is the story of the world we live on. Or both.

1:19 So, join me, Philomena Cunk, for a landmark look at the world we built together.

1:24 This is Cunk on Earth!

1:44 For billions of years, there was no **civilisation** on Earth.

1:47 Just animals, plants and gases, getting on and mingling.

1:51 Must have been beautiful, but also boring.

1:55 Until along came a **creature** that would change all that - human man.

2:00 Was Early Man similar to us?

2:02 I mean, was he made out of the same sort of meat that we are?

2:06 You know, did it have a brand name like beef or pork?

2:10 As far as we can tell, they were made out of the same stuff as us.

2:13 All we have is bones, of course, and they're exactly the same as our bones.

2:17 We can only assume that the bones were encased in flesh, something like ours, but I'm not aware of any kind of brand name that they would have had. So it would have just been flesh?

2:26 Just flesh, I think, yes.

- 2:28 It would be hard to **come up with** a brand name for human flesh, wouldn't it?
- 2:33 "HuF"?
- 2:37 We often assume early men were stupid because they had big eyebrows and said, "Ug," but in fact they were pioneering inventorers.
- 2:46 They were the first men to use tools, which is something most men have forgotten how to do today, which is why they have to get someone in - a real man.
- 2:56 How did Early Man make tools whilst walking on all fours?
- 3:01 Well, we don't think that they walked on all fours for too long.
- 3:05 We're pretty sure they were walking upright for at least the last two million years.
- 3:09 So, did they make the tools with their front legs or their hind legs?
- 3:13 Well, I don't think humans have ever been very good at making things with their feet, so, yes, it would have been the front legs that they used for making tools. Right.
- 3:21 So, in leg terms, it would have been their top legs? Yes.
- 3:23 I think they would certainly have used the top legs for making tools, or arms and hands as we call them today.
- 3:31 One thing they did **invent** was fire, which allowed them to see at night and kept them warm, tragically prolonging their already tedious lives.
- 3:40 But they had to **invent** something to do during the long, boring evenings, and that something was art.
- 3:49 I'm entering a cave, not by mistake or because I'm a wolf...
- 3:54 ..but because I've been specifically asked to come here by the producers to look at cave art.
- 4:01 Cave paintings like these are one of the first examples of **civilisation** on Earth.
- 4:10 Don't worry, it gets better.
- 4:13 Early cave artists started out painting whatever was close to hand, like their hands.
- 4:18 Then, they **branched out** into stories.
- 4:21 Initially, just boring stories about cows standing still.
- 4:25 But soon they began creating white-knuckle fight scenes like this.
- 4:29 Humans versus cows 2D.
- 4:32 To a caveman, this was the thrilling equivalent of Fast and Furious Part 7.
- 4:37 Have any of the cave paintings been adapted into films?
- 4:41 Suppose they couldn't get the rights anyway, though, could they?
- 4:44 Film-making, obviously, arose much, much later than the end of the cave paintings.
- 4:49 So, there hasn't been a cave wall that's been like, "Oh, my God, that's an incredible story.
- 4:53 "We need to get Steven Spielberg to make this"?

- 4:56 It would be hard to **come up with** a story that would last an hour and a half based on just one panel in a cave.
- 5:02 Some believe these violent images were painted as **religious** acts intended to bring good luck in upcoming battles.
- 5:08 We don't know why **humankind** was at war with the cows and, tragically, we never will.
- 5:13 In fact, we'll probably never even know the name of the artist or these cows, because whoever painted this is almost certainly dead now.
- 5:22 Hunting animals every day was **a pain in the arse** until someone **came up with** the idea of also eating plants, which were easier to catch because they couldn't run away.
- 5:34 This simple act of laziness led to the invention of farming, a huge **leap forwards**, which was now more dangerous because you might land on one of the farming implements that were suddenly lying around.
- 5:47 The early farmers grew wheat and learned to bake bread.
- 5:51 They also grew barley, peas and lentils, so they could have made a passable vegan burger to put inside the bread but, luckily, they didn't have to.
- 6:00 Because they'd also invented this - the fence.
- 6:04 A high-tech wooden machine for containing animals.
- 6:08 Humans quickly **enslaved** sheep, chickens, goats and their number one enemies, the cows.
- 6:15 Farms became a lot like zoos.
- 6:17 Except, of course, in a zoo, you can't pick out an animal you like the look off and kill it and eat it.
- 6:22 Unless, perhaps, the zoo itself is struggling financially and the owner's lost all hope.
- 6:28 Humans turned animals they couldn't eat or ride into pets if they were pretty enough.
- 6:33 Early Man **domesticated** dogs for **companionship**...
- 6:38 ..and cats for whatever we have cats for.
- 6:41 This was the first time in history life could be described as cosy.
- 6:46 People lived in proper houses, which soon grew to become cities.
- 6:51 It's hard to believe I'm walking through the **ruins** of the first-ever city, because I'm not.
- 6:55 That's in Iraq, which is miles away and fucking dangerous.
- 6:59 But the remains of it look pretty much like this, so you'd never know I wasn't actually there if I wasn't telling you now by accident.
- 7:07 Today, it's just a dismal load of bricks and dust, but if you use a modern computer to simulate what it used to look like, the results are **nothing short of breathtaking**.
- 7:18 **Civilisation** had begun.
- 7:21 Who invented **civilisation**?
- 7:24 **Civilisation** wasn't something that was invented or something that started abruptly.

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- 7:31 We talk about **civilisation** once humans started agriculture, once they started building cities and creating laws.
- 7:42 That was something that happened **gradually** in different parts of the world rather than just being invented suddenly. Yeah.
- 7:48 So, it wasn't just one man who wanted to remain anonymous?
- 7:53 No. Cos that would be something we shouldn't **go along with** if it was.
- 7:57 Do you mean we shouldn't go along...?
- 8:00 If it was one man who wants to remain anonymous, there's something a bit shifty about that, isn't there?
- 8:06 So, **civilisation** was invented in Mesopotamia by person or persons unknown.
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4 Vocabulary — 14 words worth remembering

Word	Pronunciation	Meaning	In the clip
humankind	/ˈhju:mənkaɪnd/	all human beings as a group	<i>This is the incredible story of how humankind transformed our world.</i>
transform	/trænsˈfɔ:m/	to change something completely	<i>...how humankind transformed our world.</i>
civilisation	/ˌsɪvəlɪzˈzeɪʃn/	an organized human society with cities, laws and culture	<i>For billions of years, there was no civilisation on Earth.</i>
stunning	/ˈstʌnɪŋ/	extremely beautiful or surprising	<i>...getting up close to some of our species' most stunning achievements.</i>
achievement	/əˈtʃi:vmənt/	something great that someone has done successfully	<i>...our species' most stunning achievements.</i>
creature	/ˈkri:tʃə/	any living thing that is not a plant	<i>Until along came a creature that would change all that — human man.</i>
invent	/ɪnˈvent/	to make or design something completely new	<i>One thing they did invent was fire.</i>
domesticate	/dəˈmestɪkət/	to tame an animal to live with people	<i>Early Man domesticated dogs for companionship.</i>
companionship	/kəmˈpænjənʃɪp/	the nice feeling of being with someone	<i>Early Man domesticated dogs for companionship.</i>
religious	/rɪˈlɪdʒəs/	connected with religion or belief	<i>...these violent images were painted as religious acts.</i>
gradually	/ˈgrædʒuəli/	slowly, over a long period of time	<i>That was something that happened gradually in different parts of the world.</i>
ruins	/ˈru:ɪnz/	the broken remains of old buildings	<i>...walking through the ruins of the first-ever city.</i>
breathtaking	/ˈbreθteɪkɪŋ/	so beautiful or surprising it takes your breath away	<i>...the results are nothing short of breathtaking.</i>
tedious	/ˈti:diəs/	boring and lasting too long	<i>...tragically prolonging their already tedious lives.</i>

5 Idioms & Phrasal Verbs

Phrase	Type	Meaning	In the clip
chances are	idiom	it is very likely	<i>...chances are you are, too.</i>

come up with	phrasal v.	to think of an idea or a plan	<i>...until someone came up with the idea of also eating plants.</i>
branch out (into)	phrasal v.	to start doing something new or different	<i>Then, they branched out into stories.</i>
a pain in the arse	idiom	something very annoying (informal British!)	<i>Hunting animals every day was a pain in the arse.</i>
a huge leap forward(s)	idiom	a big improvement or progress	<i>...the invention of farming, a huge leap forwards.</i>
nothing short of	idiom	truly; used to emphasise how extreme something is	<i>...the results are nothing short of breathtaking.</i>
go along with	phrasal v.	to accept or agree with something	<i>...that would be something we shouldn't go along with.</i>

6 Grammar Spotlight

Past passive: was/were + past participle

We use the passive when the ACTION is more important than WHO did it. Past passive = was/were + past participle (V3). Documentaries use it a lot, because they talk about things done long ago — often nobody knows who did them.

- *Some believe these violent images were painted as religious acts. (Who painted them? We don't know — and it doesn't matter.)*
- *Civilisation wasn't something that was invented. (Nobody 'invented' it.)*
- *Why do they say it's a mystery how the pyramids were built? (The pyramids = the object, so we use passive.)*

Learn more: English Grammar in Use — Passive units

7 Practice — circle / match / fill in; answers on the last page

Understand the story

1. **Why does Cunk say early people invented art?**
 - A. They wanted to sell paintings
 - B. They needed something to do during long, boring evenings
 - C. They wanted to decorate their houses
2. **According to the expert, how did civilisation begin?**
 - A. One anonymous man invented it
 - B. It was invented in a laboratory
 - C. It happened gradually in different parts of the world
3. **Why is farming described as 'this simple act of laziness'?**
 - A. Because plants were easier to catch — they cannot run away
 - B. Because farmers slept all day
 - C. Because cows did all the work

True or False

4. **Cave artists started by painting their own hands. True / False**
5. **Cunk is really standing in Iraq when she talks about the first city. True / False**
6. **Early humans kept cats because cats are very useful. True / False**

Fill the gap

7. **For _____ of years, there was no civilisation on Earth.**
(billions · hundreds · dozens)
8. **Humans quickly _____ sheep, chickens, goats and their number one enemies, the cows.**
(enslaved · invited · painted)
9. **Early Man _____ dogs for companionship.**
(domesticated · transformed · painted)

Word meanings

10. **'The results are nothing short of BREATHTAKING.' — breathtaking means:**
 - A. very boring
 - B. extremely impressive
 - C. quite dangerous
11. **'...prolonging their already TEDIOUS lives.' — tedious means:**
 - A. exciting
 - B. boring and too long
 - C. short and happy

Match the phrases

12. Match each phrase with its meaning:

Phrase		Meaning (mixed order)
1. chances are	→ ____	a. a big improvement
2. come up with	→ ____	b. truly / really (emphasis)
3. branch out into	→ ____	c. think of (an idea)
4. nothing short of	→ ____	d. it is very likely
5. go along with	→ ____	e. accept, agree with
6. a huge leap forward	→ ____	f. start doing something new

8 Listen Again — one last listen; tick each phrase when you hear it

- This is our planet. Planet Earth.
- chances are you are, too
- For billions of years, there was no civilisation on Earth.
- They were the first men to use tools.
- One thing they did invent was fire.
- Then, they branched out into stories.
- ...a huge leap forwards
- Civilisation had begun.

Answer Key — check yourself after finishing

Before You Watch: B · **Gist:** A · **Detail:** 1-A, 2-B, 3-B, 4-C

Understand the story: 1-B · 2-C · 3-A

True or False: 4-True · 5-False · 6-False

Fill the gap: 7-billions · 8-enslaved · 9-domesticated

Word meanings: 10-B · 11-B

Match the phrases: 12: 1→d, 2→c, 3→f, 4→b, 5→e, 6→a

1: She says: 'they had to invent something to do during the long, boring evenings, and that something was art' — a funny way to say art was born from... boredom.

2: The professor says clearly: it 'happened gradually in different parts of the world rather than being invented suddenly'. The 'one anonymous man' question is Cunk's joke.

3: A classic Cunk joke: plants were 'easier to catch because they couldn't run away' — farming was born from laziness.

4: '...started out painting whatever was close to hand, like their hands' — a word joke: 'close to hand' (= easy to reach) and 'hands'.

5: She admits it herself: 'It's hard to believe I'm walking through the ruins of the first-ever city, because I'm not.' — they filmed somewhere else, because Iraq is 'miles away and dangerous'.

6: The joke: '...and cats for whatever we have cats for' — dogs are for companionship, but cats... nobody knows why we have cats.

7: 'For billions of years' — a very, very long time.

8: 'Enslaved' is a strong word, normally used about people — that's why it sounds funny about... chickens and sheep.

9: To domesticate = to tame a wild animal so it lives with people.

10: breath + taking → so impressive that it 'takes your breath away'.

11: Tedious = boring and too long. The whole line is a joke: fire helped people live longer → 'prolonging their already tedious lives'.