ENGLISH LESSON · CUNK ON EARTH S01E01 · INTERMEDIATE

In the Beginnings — From Cavemen to Cities

Clip: 8:03 · 13 words · 7 idioms & phrasal verbs · 2026-07-07

Watch again online



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), 'clevernauts', '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

Warm-up: Which phrase suggests a major improvement?

- **A.** a huge leap forward
- **B.** go along with
- **C.** close to hand

> **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 Watch 1 — with subtitles

First watch — subtitles ON. Catch the main idea: What contrast drives the clip?

- **A.** Modern cities versus modern farms
- **B.** Serious history versus Cunk's absurd explanations
- **C.** Artists versus film directors

Watch 2 — subtitles ON again. Detail questions (after transcript / vocab on class day):

1. What does 'nothing short of breathtaking' mean here?

- **A.** Almost disappointing
- **B.** Hard to see
- **C.** Extremely impressive

2. Why does the narrator say 'were painted'?

- **A.** The painter is unknown or unimportant
- **B.** The painting is happening now
- **C.** The painter is the sentence focus

3. How does the expert correct Cunk's version of civilisation?

- **A.** It developed gradually in several places
- **B.** It began with cave art
- **C.** It was designed by one ruler

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.

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.

4 Vocabulary — 13 words worth remembering

Word	Pronunciation	Meaning & use	In the clip
humankind	/ˈhjuːmənkaɪnd/	all human beings as a group	*This is the incredible story of how humankind transformed our world.*
transform	/trænsˈfɔːm/	to change something completely **Use:** transform A into B · a large or complete change	*...how humankind transformed our world.*
civilisation	/ˌsɪvəlaɪˈzeɪʃn/	an organized human society with cities, laws and culture **Use:** civilisation (the system) · a civilisation (one society)	*For billions of years, there was no civilisation on Earth.*
stunning	/ˈstʌnɪŋ/	extremely beautiful or surprising	*...getting up close to some of our species' most stunning achievements.*
achievement	/əˈtʃiːvmənt/	something great that someone has done successfully	*...our species' most stunning achievements.*
creature	/ˈkriːtʃə/	any living thing that is not a plant	*Until along came a creature that would change all that — human man.*
invent	/ɪnˈvent/	to make or design something completely new	*One thing they did invent was fire.*
domesticate	/dəˈmestɪkeɪt/	to tame an animal to live with people	*Early Man domesticated dogs for companionship.*
companionship	/kəmˈpænjənʃɪp/	the nice feeling of being with someone	*Early Man domesticated dogs for companionship.*
gradually	/ˈgrædʒuəli/	slowly, over a long period of time	

		Use: gradual (adjective) → gradually (adverb) · over time	*That was something that happened gradually in different parts of the world.*
ruins	/ˈruːɪnz/	the broken remains of old buildings	*...walking through the ruins of the first-ever city.*
breathtaking	/ˈbreθteɪkɪŋ/	so beautiful or surprising it takes your breath away **Use:** breathtaking view / performance / achievement	*...the results are nothing short of breathtaking.*
tedious	/ˈtiːdiəs/	boring and lasting too long **Use:** tedious task / process / meeting · stronger than boring	*...tragically prolonging their already tedious lives.*

5 Idioms & Phrasal Verbs

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

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.

Form: receiver of the action + was/were + past participle (+ by ...)

• *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.)*

Compare:

• People painted the images. ↔ The images were painted. (Active focuses on people; passive focuses on the images.)

Watch out: Use the past participle: were painted, not were paint or did invented.

Learn more: English Grammar in Use — Passive units

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

Vocabulary in context

1. Which collocation sounds natural?

A. a tedious victory
B. a tedious sunset
C. a tedious process

2. The villages changed _____ over many centuries.

(gradual · gradualness · gradually)

Phrases in use

3. 'Nothing short of remarkable' means:

A. slightly remarkable
B. truly remarkable
C. not remarkable

4. Match each phrase with its meaning:

Phrase		Meaning (mixed order)
1. come up with	→ ____	a. start a new activity
2. branch out into	→ ____	b. think of an idea
3. go along with	→ ____	c. a major improvement
4. a leap forward	→ ____	d. accept or agree with

Grammar in use

5. Choose the correct passive version: 'People painted these images.'

A. These images painted people.
B. These images were painted.
C. These images were painting.

6. Which sentence has a correct negative passive?

A. Civilisation didn't invented suddenly.
B. Civilisation wasn't invent suddenly.
C. Civilisation wasn't invented suddenly.

7. Why is passive useful in 'the pyramids were built'?

A. It keeps attention on the pyramids
B. It makes the action present
C. It names the builders

Listening detail

8. Which exact form do you hear?

- **A.** Civilisation didn't invent
- **B.** Civilisation isn't inventing
- **C.** Civilisation wasn't something that was invented

Meaning and tone

9. What is the expert correcting?

- **A.** The date of the first cave painting
- **B.** The idea that one person suddenly invented civilisation
- **C.** The purpose of farming tools

8 Final listen — NO subtitles — prove what you remember

Subtitles are OFF. Listen for today's language, not plot trivia.

Catch the line

- ☐ chances are you are, too
- ☐ were painted as religious acts
- ☐ ...a huge leap forwards
- ☐ nothing short of breathtaking
- ☐ happened gradually

What did they say?

1. Which exact phrase intensifies 'breathtaking'?

- **A.** nothing sort of
- **B.** nothing short of
- **C.** not short enough

2. Which passive form do you hear?

- **A.** wasn't something that was invented
- **B.** didn't invent
- **C.** was inventing

Put the lines in order

____ Civilisation had begun.

____ This simple act of laziness led to the invention of farming.

____ Early Man domesticated dogs for companionship.

Answer Key — check yourself after finishing

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

Vocabulary in context: 1-C · 2-gradually

Phrases in use: 3-B · 4: 1→b, 2→a, 3→d, 4→c

Grammar in use: 5-B · 6-C · 7-A

Listening detail: 8-C

Meaning and tone: 9-B

Final — said what: 1-B · 2-A

Final — order: 1 → 2 → 0

1: Tedious commonly describes work or a process that is boring and long.

2: An adverb modifies changed; gradually means little by little.

3: Nothing short of intensifies the adjective after it.

5: Past passive uses was/were plus the past participle.

6: Wasn't plus invented is the correct negative past passive.

7: The object and result matter more than an unknown agent.

8: Listen for wasn't and was invented: two passive forms.

9: He rejects a single inventor and describes gradual development.