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To get around these problems, astronomers invented the "mean Sun" for timekeeping, and it moves at a uniform rate (not a variable rate) along the celestial equator (not the ecliptic). Both it and the true Sun have the same average angular speed, taking one year to complete one trip around the sky (in different planes, however). Being fictitious, one can"t actually observe mean Sun. Nevertheless, mean Sun is the prime mover that we use for all civil timekeeping. We can track its motion relative to the celestial meridian with a mechanical (or nowadays, digital) device called a "clock."

When we say "noon" most people think of Sun being at its highest point in the sky, which need not be the zenith, but will ALWAYS be somewhere on the celestial meridian (yes, things get weird in the arctic and antarctic regions). However, "noon" really only applies to true Sun"s motions. We keep time by mean Sun"s motions, and a mean solar clock ALWAYS reads 12:00 when mean Sun is on the meridian. This moment, except for four days of the year, does not coincide with "noon" as embodied by true Sun"s motions.

The main cause is that the length of a day changes during the year. For example the Earth moves faster relative to the Sun at perihelion than it does at aphelion. This means the period from noon to noon measured by a sundial is not the same as the period measured using one of the standard time schemes like universal time. The other significant cause of changes in tne day length is the tilting of the Earth"s orbit.

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