

Inversion

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What is inversion and how to use it?

In statement it is usual for the verb to follow the subject, but sometimes this word order is reversed. We can refer to this as **inversion**. There are two main types of inversion:

- when the verb comes before the subject (optional inversion)

*In the doorway **stood** her father. (or ...her father stood.)*

- when the auxiliary comes before the subject and the rest of the verb phrase follows the subject (inversion is usually necessary)

*Rarely **had** he **seen** such a sunset. (not ~~Rarely he had see...~~)*

Inversion brings about *fronting*, the re-ordering of information in a sentence to give emphasis in a particular place. Often this causes an element to be postponed until later in the sentence, focusing attention on it.

Inversion after negative adverbials

When we begin a sentence with a negative adverb or adverbial phrase, we sometimes have to change the usual word order of subject and verb (often using an auxiliary verb) because we want to emphasise the meaning of the adverb. We use inversion when we move a negative adverb which modifies the verb (never, nowhere, not only, hardly etc.) to the beginning of a sentence. For example:

***I had never** seen so many people in one room. (= normal word order)*

***Never had I** seen so many people in one room. (= inversion)*

There are adverbs and adverbial expressions with a negative, restrictive or emphatic meaning, which are followed by inversion when placed first in a sentence. The most common adverbs and adverbial expressions with negative, restrictive or emphatic meaning that are followed by inversion are:

Seldom, Rarely, Little, Nowhere, Nor even one, In no way

Scarcely/Hardly/Barely ... when, No sooner ... than, Not only ... but (also)

On no occasion/account/condition, In/Under no circumstances

Only after, Only later, Only once, Only in this way, Only by, Only then, Only when, Only if, Not till/until, Never, Never

before, Not since, Neither/Not/So, Well (formal) etc:

'I like chicken', 'So do I'.

***Well did he remember** the night the earthquake struck.*

***On no occasion** was the girl allowed to say out late.*

***Never had he had** such a terrifying experience.*

***Little did he know** what his decision would lead to.*

- *Time relationships*

We use inversion (you can find additional information and examples in the end of the unit):

after 'negative' adverbs which emphasise a time relation at the beginning of a sentence:

***No sooner had I** put the phone down **than** it rung again.*

***Hardly / Scarcely / Barely had I** got my breath back **when** it was time to go again.*

***Seldom do** we **have** goods returned to us because they are faulty.*

after phrases that use *not*:

***Not until** he apologies **will I** speak to him again*

***Not since** I was little **have I** had so much fun.*

***Not for one minute do I** imagine they'll come back.*

***Not once** was she at home when I phoned.*

after some time phrases that use *only* + a time expression or *only* + prepositional phrase:

Only after several weeks **did she** begin to recover.

Only later **did she** realise what had happened.

Only then **did he** remember he hadn't got his keys.

Only when I've finished this **will I** be able to think about anything else.

Only in the last few days **has the truth** started to emerge.

Only by keeping a signal-fire burning **did the woman** manage to alert her rescuers.

Only later **didn't she** realize that she'd been given the wrong change.

Only once **did I** go to the opera the whole time I was in Italy.

Only by chance **had Jameson** discovered where the birds were nesting.

Only in this way was she **able** to complete the report by the deadline.

Note!

Only after, only by, only if, only when, not until/till when placed at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis, require the inversion of the subject and the auxiliary verb in the main clause:

Only after all her guests had left **did she** wash the dishes.

Only by standing on a chair **could he** reach the shelf.

Not till the last guest had left **were we** able to relax.

Not until I saw him **did I** remember we had met before.

~~**Not until** did I see him **I** remembered we had met before.~~

• Frequency

We also use inversion after 'negative' adverbs at the beginning of a sentence to emphasise:

1. frequency:

Never have I been so taken aback.

Rarely do they fail to get away for a holiday.

Seldom is that pop group out of the news.

Hardly ever did he wear a suit.

2. how infrequently things happen:

Little did she realise what was about to happen. (= She didn't realize or didn't realize sufficiently)

Nowhere was a replacement to be found.

• General emphasis

We often use inversion for general emphasis with phrases that use *only*:

Only by patience and hard work **will we** find a solution.

Only in this way do we stand any chance of success.

We can also use it with phrases that use *no*:

At no time would he admit that his team played badly.

In no way should this be regarded as an end of the matter.

On no account are you to repeat this to anyone.

Under no circumstances can we accept the offer.

• Not using inversion

We use inversion when the adverb modifies the verb, and not when it modifies the noun:

Rarely seen during the day, the badger is a famously shy animal. (= inversion)

Hardly anyone knows about it. (= no inversion)

Inversion in conditions

• *Conditional type 1*

In formal contexts we can omit *if* or other conditional words and start the sentence with *should*:

Should you change your mind, please let me know.

• *Conditional type 2*

We use *be to* in a fairly formal way to express conditions. It suggests that the speaker has no influence over whether the condition will be fulfilled or not. *Are to*, *am to* and *is to* suggest the condition may be fulfilled. *Were to* (or, informally, *was to*) emphasises that the condition is very unlikely. Using the conditional *if*-clause is one way to express such conditions; however, we can omit *if* or other conditional words and start the sentence with *were* (but this is **not** possible with *are*):

Were we to take on more staff, how could we afford to pay them?

Were the vote to go against me, I'd resign.

Were he to agree, he'd probably become the next coach.

Were you a brighter fellow, you'd have gone along with the scheme.

• *Conditional type 3*

We use an Unreal Past Perfect in the *if*-clause when we are thinking about how things might have been different. In the conditional sentence we can omit *if* or other conditional words and start with *Had*:

Had I believed her for one moment, I wouldn't have refused to help.

Had you told me earlier, I would/could/might have done something about it.

We can also use conditional structures beginning with *Were* + *perfect infinitive* in formal English:

Were you to have stopped and considered, you'd have seen the error of your ways.

Inversion in result clauses

The main ways of introducing result clauses in formal English are: *so... (that)*, *such... (that)*, *to such a degree ...*. We can use *so* + *adjective* at the beginning of a clause to give special emphasis to the adjective:

So disgusted were they by the bad language (**that**) they walked out.

We can use *such* + *be* at the beginning of a clause to emphasise the extent or degree of something:

Such was our annoyance (**that**) we refused to cooperate further.

We use inversion after *neither* or *nor* when these words begin a clause to introduce a negative addition to a previous negative clause or sentence:

For some time after the explosion Jack couldn't hear, and **neither could he see**.

The council never wanted the new supermarket to be built, **not did local residents**.

Inversion with come

We can put *first*, *next*, *now* and *then* in front position with the verb *come* to introduce a new event, when the subject follows the verb. But if a comma (or an intonation break in speech) is used after *first* (etc.) the verb follows the subject. For example:

At first there was silence. **Then came** a voice that I knew. (not *Then a voice came ...*)

At first there was silence. **Then**, a voice **came** that I knew.

Inversion in spoken English

In conversation we use **Here comes + noun** and **There goes + noun**, with inversion of verb and subject, to talk about things and people moving towards or away from the speaker:

Here comes the bus.

There goes Nigel Salter, the footballer.

Here comes... is also used to say that something is going to happen soon, and **There goes...** is used when to talk about things (particularly money) being lost and to say that something (such as a phone or door bell) is ringing:

Here comes lunch.

My bike's been stolen! There goes £100!

There goes the phone. Can you answer it?

Inversion with prepositions

We can put the verb before the subject when we use adverbs expressing direction of movement, such as **along, away, back, down, in, off, out, up** with verbs such as **come, fly, go**. This pattern is found particularly in narrative, to mark a change in events:

*The door opened and **in came** the doctor. (less formally ...and the doctor came in)*

*As soon as I let go of the string, **up went the balloon**, high into the sky.*

(less formally ...the balloon went up)

*Just when I thought I'd have to walk home, **along came Miguel** and **he** gave me a lift.*

(less formally ...Miguel came along and gave me ...)

*Inversion after **as** and **than** in comparisons*

In formal written language we commonly use inversion after *as* and *than* in comparisons:

*The cake was excellent, **as was the coffee**. (or ...as the coffee was.)*

*I believed, **as did my colleagues**, that the plan would work. (or ...as my colleagues did...)*

*Research shows that parents watch more television **than do their children**. (or ...than their children do.)*

Notice that we don't invert subject and verb after *as* or *than* when the subject is a pronoun:

*We now know a lot more about the Universe **than we did** ten years ago. (not ...than did we ten years ago.)*

Inversion without auxiliary verb

After adverbs and adverbial expressions:

'There goes Tom!'

but: *'There **he** goes!'*

After the quoted words of direct speech:

*'I've just finished', **said Tom**.*

but: *'I've just finished', **he** said.*

Useful structural conversions

All the food had been prepared and the table had been laid as well.

***Not only** had all the food been prepared but also the table had been laid.*

As soon as he was promoted, he started behaving arrogantly.

*No sooner had he been promoted **than** he started behaving arrogantly.*

***Hardly/Scarcely** had he been promoted when he started behaving arrogantly.*

He had no idea that the treasure had been hidden in his garden.

***Little did he** know that the treasure had been hidden in his garden.*

*She danced **so much** that she couldn't walk afterwards*

***So much** did she dance that she couldn't walk afterwards.*

*It was **such** a nice day that we went on an excursion.*

***Such** a nice day was it that we went on an excursion.*

They finished painting and then they moved into their new house.

***Only after** they had finished painting did they move into their new house.*

*If **I were** you, I would accept his offer.*

***Were I** you, I would accept his offer.*

*If **I had** been told earlier, I would have reacted differently.*

***Had I** been told earlier, I would have reacted differently.*

*If **I** (should) change my mind, I'll let you know.*

***Should I** change my mind, I'll let you know.*

She didn't phone me; she didn't drop me a line either.

*She didn't phone me **nor** did she drop me a line.*

*She **neither** phoned me, **nor** did she drop me a line.*

She won't tell lies for any reason.

***On no account** will she tell lies.*

The boy ran away.

***Away** ran the boy!*