

Inversions

We use inversion in several different situations in English. Inversion just means putting the verb before the subject. We usually do it in question forms. In most English verb tenses, when we want to use inversion, we just move the verb to before the subject. If there's more than one verb, because a verb tense has auxiliary verbs for example, we move the first verb. With two verb tenses where we just change the places of the verb and subject:

- Present simple with 'be': am I / are you / is he
- Past simple with 'be': were you / was she

With other verbs tenses, we change the place of the subject and the auxiliary verb (the first auxiliary verb if there is more than one). We don't move the other parts of the verb.

When do we use inversion? Of course, we use inversion in questions. But we also sometimes use inversion in other cases, when we are not making a question.

1: When we use a negative adverb or adverb phrase at the beginning of the sentence. Usually, we put the expression at the beginning of the sentence to emphasise what we're saying. It makes our sentence sound surprising or striking or unusual. It also sounds quite formal. If you don't want to give this impression, you can put the negative expression later in the sentence in the normal way. Here are some negative adverbs and adverb phrases that we often use with inversion:

- Hardly: Hardly had I got into bed when the telephone rang.
- Never: Never had she seen such a beautiful sight before.
- Seldom: Seldom do we see such an amazing display of dance.
- Rarely: Rarely will you hear such beautiful music.
- Only then: Only then did I understand why the tragedy had happened.
- Not only ... but: Not only does he love chocolate and sweets but he also smokes.
- No sooner: No sooner had we arrived home than the police rang the doorbell.
- Scarcely: Scarcely had I got off the bus when it crashed into the back of a car.
- Only later: Only later did she really think about the situation.
- Nowhere: Nowhere have I ever had such bad service.
- Little: Little did he know!
- Only in this way: Only in this way could John earn enough money to survive.
- In no way: In no way do I agree with what you're saying.
- On no account: On no account should you do anything without asking me first.

In the following expressions, the inversion comes in the second part of the sentence:

- Not until Not until I saw John with my own eyes did I really believe he was safe.
- Not since Not since Lucy left college had she had such a wonderful time.
- Only after Only after I'd seen her flat did I understand why she wanted to live there.
- Only when Only when we'd all arrived home did I feel calm.
- Only by Only by working extremely hard could we afford to eat.

We only use inversion when the adverb modifies the whole phrase and not when it modifies the noun: Hardly anyone passed the exam. (No inversion.)

2: We can use inversion instead of 'if' in conditionals with 'had' 'were' and 'should'. This is quite formal:

Normal conditional: If I had been there, this problem wouldn't have happened.

Conditional with inversion: Had I been there, this problem wouldn't have happened.

Normal conditional: If we had arrived sooner, we could have prevented this tragedy!

Conditional with inversion: Had we arrived sooner, we could have prevented this tragedy!

3: We can use inversion if we put an adverbial expression of place at the beginning on the sentence. This is also quite formal or literary:

On the table was all the money we had lost. (Normal sentence: All the money we had lost was on the table.)

Round the corner came the knights. (Normal sentence: The knights came round the corner.)

4: We can use inversion after 'so + adjective...that':

So beautiful was the girl that nobody could talk of anything else. (Normal sentence: the girl was so beautiful that nobody could talk of anything else.)

So delicious was the food that we ate every last bite. (Normal sentence: the food was so delicious that we ate every last bite.)