

Lesson 1: Inversion

inversion (1): auxiliary verb before subject

We put an auxiliary verb (and non-auxiliary *have* and *be*) directly before the subject of a clause in several different structures.

questions

Have they arrived yet?

Are you going to university?

with *may*

May can come before the subject in wishes.

May all your wishes come true!

May he rot in hell!

after *so, neither, nor*

In 'short answers' and similar structures, these words are followed by **auxiliary verb + subject**.

I'm hungry. ~ So am I. "Jamal lost the match." "So did you you."

I don't like opera. ~ Neither/Nor do I.

For more details of these structures, see 541 and 374.

after *as, than* and *so*

Inversion sometimes happens after *as, than* and *so* in a literary style.

She was very religious, as were most of her friends.

(*City dwellers have a higher death rate than do country people.*)

So ridiculous did she look that everybody burst out laughing.

conditional clauses

In formal and literary conditional clauses, an auxiliary verb can be put before the subject instead of using *if* (see 261.5).

Were she my daughter ... (= If she were my daughter ...)

Had I realised what you intended ... (= If I had realised ...)

Negatives are not contracted in this case.

Had we not spent all our money already, ... (NOT ~~*Hadn't we spent ...*~~ ...)

after negative and restrictive expressions

If a negative adverb or adverbial expression is put at the beginning of a clause for emphasis, it is usually followed by **auxiliary verb + subject**. These structures are mostly rather formal.

Under no circumstances can we cash cheques.

At no time was the President aware of what was happening.

Not until much later did she learn who her real father was.

The same structure is possible after a complete clause beginning *not until* . . .

Not until he received her letter did he fully understand her feelings.

Inversion is also used after restrictive words like *hardly* (in BrE), *seldom*, *rarely*, *little* and *never*, and after *only* + time expression. This is formal or literary.

Hardly had I arrived when trouble started. (BrE)

Seldom have I seen such a remarkable creature.

Little did he realise the danger he faced.

Never . . . was so much owed by so many to so few. (Churchill)

Only then did I understand what she meant.

Only after her death was I able to appreciate her.

Not only did we lose our money, but we were nearly killed.

Not a single word did he say.

Inversion is not used after *not far* . . . and *not long* . . .

Not far from here you can see foxes. (NOT ~~*Not far from here can you . . .*~~)

Not long after that she got married.

inversion (2): whole verb before subject

after adverbial expressions of place

When an adverbial expression of place or direction comes at the beginning of a clause, intransitive verbs are often put before their subjects. This happens especially when a new indefinite subject is being introduced. The structure is most common in literary and descriptive writing.

Under a tree was lying one of the biggest men I had ever seen.

On the grass sat an enormous frog.

Directly in front of them stood a great castle.

Along the road came a strange procession.

This structure is often used in speech with *here*, *there* and other short adverbs and adverb particles.

Here comes Freddy! (NOT ~~*Here Freddy comes.*~~)

There goes your brother.

I stopped the car, and up walked a policeman.

The door opened and out came Angela's boyfriend.

If the subject is a pronoun, it goes before the verb.

Here she comes. (NOT ~~*Here comes she.*~~) *Off we go!*

reporting

In story-telling, the subject often comes after reporting verbs like *said*, *asked*, *suggested* etc when these follow direct speech.

'What do you mean?' asked Henry. (OR . . . *Henry asked.*)

'I love you,' whispered Jan.

If the subject is a pronoun, it usually comes before the verb.

'What do you mean?' he asked.