

Inversion

Introduction



Never **have I seen** such a beautiful blue sea.

Definition

This is a sentence structure in which the verb is placed before the subject.

Construction

In English, 'subject + verb + object' is the most common structure. However, in certain types of sentence, we invert the verb and subject. The examples below are in the present, but the same basic structure applies to other tenses.

	Usual structure	Inversion
'to be'	I am <u>I am</u> rarely late.	am I Rarely am I late.
(Modal) auxiliary verbs	I can go <u>I can</u> only go on Mondays. I am going <u>I am</u> never going there again.	can I go Only on Mondays can I go . am I going Never again am I going there.
Other verbs	I go <u>I don't go</u> to bed until I'm really tired.	do I go Not until I'm really tired do I go to bed.

Uses and examples

When a negative or restrictive adverb or adverbial phrase is placed at the beginning of a sentence, we use this structure in order to place emphasis on the negative aspect of a situation or on its uniqueness.

1. Here are some examples:

Note that some of these are more commonly used in conversation than others. If in doubt, it is better to use examples that you have already heard.

hardly	Hardly had we solved one problem when another came up.
(in) no way	No way is this a good idea!
little	Little does he know the boss is planning to fire him.
never	Never have we had such a terrible summer as this.
no sooner	No sooner had we solved one problem than another one came along!
not only...but	Not only is it cold but it's been raining all week too.
nowhere	Nowhere in this report is there any mention of my contribution!
only in this way	Only in this way can we ever hope to make an improvement.
only later	Only later did I realise that I'd made a terrible mistake.
only then	Only then will it be possible to move on to the next stage.
on no account	On no account should you accept the job - it isn't right for you at all.
rarely	Rarely do we see foreign films in English cinemas.
scarcely	Scarcely had I sat down to relax when the phone rang.

seldom	Seldom do we ever get a response when we call the helpline.
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With some expressions, the inversion is placed in the second part of the sentence. For example:

Not until	Not until I saw it in writing did I really believe it was true.
Not since	Not since I was a teenager have I had so much fun.
Only after	Only after I'd explained it to him clearly did he begin to calm down.
Only by	Only by working at weekends can we really hope to meet the deadline.
Only if/when	Only if I pass this exam will I be able to get the job I really want.

When an adverbial expression of place is placed at the beginning of a sentence or clause, we sometimes use inversion.

Use	Examples
In literary contexts	Into the room strode the tallest man she'd ever seen. Out of the mist appeared a herd of beautiful white horses.
In conversation if we want to add some drama when telling a story	So...it was dull and rainy and I was sitting in the canteen, feeling really miserable when in walked my manager . I'd lost a really important file and didn't want to see him so I escaped by the other door. In the conference room were a bunch of people having a meeting so I couldn't hide in there either. From the other direction came a group of visitors so I headed into John's office and there on his desk was the file! Then out came the sun and everything seemed ok again.
Common conversational expressions with 'here' and 'there'	Here comes Sandra with the coffee. There goes the bus! We've missed it again.

With 'so' + adjective and 'such'

So grateful **were they** for everything that they invited us out to dinner to say thanks.

Such **was his talent** for languages that he could speak four fluently by the time he

left school.

Note that these structures are rarely used in conversation and are more likely to be found in writing, especially in a literary context.

See also

Asking questions

Second and Third Conditionals

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