

Explanations

The term inversion covers two different grammatical operations.

- Using a question form of the main verb
Not only did he fail to report the accident, but also later denied that he had been driving the car.
Never have I enjoyed myself more!
- Changing the normal positions of verb and subject
Along the street came a strange procession.
See Grammar 14 for an explanation of this example.

Inversion after negative adverbials

- This only occurs when the adverbial occurs at the beginning of a clause. All the examples below are used in formal language, usually for rhetorical effect, such as in political speeches. They are not usual in everyday spoken language. Compare:
Never have I heard a weaker excuse!
I have never heard a weaker excuse!

- Time expressions: *never, rarely, seldom*
These are most commonly used with present perfect or past perfect, or with modals such as *can* and *could*. Sentences of this type often contain comparatives.
Rarely can a minister have been faced with such a problem.
Seldom has the team given a worse performance.
Rarely had I had so much responsibility.

- Time expressions: *hardly, barely, scarcely, no sooner*
These refer to an event which quickly follows another in the past. They are usually used with past perfect, although *no sooner* can be followed by past simple. Note the words used in the contrasting clause.
Hardly had the train left the station, when there was an explosion.
Scarcely had I entered the room when the phone rang.
No sooner had I reached the door than I realised it was locked.
No sooner was the team back on the pitch than it started raining.

- After *only*
Here *only* combines with other time expressions and is usually used with past simple.
Only after posting the letter did I remember that I had forgotten to put on a stamp.
Other examples are *only if/when, only then, only later*.

Note that when *only* refers to 'the state of being the only one', there is no inversion following it.

Only Mary realised that the door was not locked.

- Phrases containing *no/not*
These include *under no circumstances, on no account, at no time, in no way, on no condition, not until, not only ... (but also)*.
On no condition are they to open fire without a warning.
Not until I got home did I notice that I had the wrong umbrella.
- Little*
Little also has a negative or restrictive meaning in this sense:
Little does the government appreciate what the results will be.

- This occurs with *so* and adjectives when the main verb is *be*. It is used for emphasis and is more common than the example with *such*.

So devastating were the floods that some areas may never recover.

- Such* used with *be* means *so much/so great*

Such was the force of the storm that trees were uprooted.

- As in the examples with *such*, inversion only occurs if *so/such* is the first word in the clause.

Inverted conditional sentences without if

- Three types of *If*- sentence can be inverted without *If*. This makes the sentences more formal and makes the event less likely.

If they were to escape, there would be an outcry.

Were they to escape, there would be an outcry.

If the police had found out, I would have been in trouble.

Were the police to have found out, I would have been in trouble.

If you should hear anything, let me know.

Should you hear anything, let me know.

If he has cheated, he will have to be punished.

Should he have cheated, he will have to be punished.

If I had known, I would have protested strongly.

Had I known, I would have protested strongly.

- Inversion after *as*
This is more common in formal or written language.
We were short of money, as were most people in our neighbourhood.
I thought, as did my colleagues, that the recession would soon be over.
- Inversion after *so, neither* and *nor*
These are used in 'echoing' statements, agreeing or disagreeing.
A: / am going home. B: So am I.
A: / don't like meat. B: Neither do I.

See Grammar 14 for ways of giving emphasis without inverting after *so*.