Inversion

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:

- Normal sentence: You are tired. (The subject is 'you'. It's before the verb 'are'.)
- Question form: Are you tired? (The verb 'are' is before the subject 'you'. They have changed places. This is called 'inversion'.)

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.

There are 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 verb 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:

- Present continuous: am I going / are you going
- Past continuous: was he going / were they going
- Present perfect: have we gone / has she gone
- Present perfect continuous: has she been going / have they been going
- Past perfect: had you gone
- Past perfect continuous: had he been going
- Future simple: will they go
- Future continuous: will you be going
- Future perfect: will they have gone
- Future perfect continuous: will she have been going
- Modal verbs: should I go / would you go

There are two tenses where we need to add do / does / did to make the question form. This is usually still called inversion.

- Present simple with any verb except 'be' (add 'do' or 'does'): do you go / does he go
- Past simple with any verb except 'be' (add 'did'): did we go / did they go

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:

- Seldom have I seen such beautiful work.
  ('Seldom' is at the beginning, so we use inversion. This sentence emphasizes what beautiful work it is.)

- I have seldom seen such beautiful work.

  ('Seldom' is in the normal place, so we don't use inversion. This is a normal sentence with no special emphasis.)

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.)

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.

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.)