18

Inversion, Fronting, and Cleft Sentences

English word order is rigid — which is exactly why deliberate departures from it carry so much emphasis. This chapter covers the three main emphasis-shifting devices.

18.1 Negative inversion

When a negative or restrictive adverbial opens the sentence, subject and auxiliary invert, exactly as in a question:

- ***Never have I seen*** *such chaos.*
- ***Rarely does*** *a debut novel* ***attract*** *such praise.*
- ***Under no circumstances should*** *passengers* ***leave*** *their seats.*
- ***Not until the final page do*** *we* ***learn*** *the truth.*
- ***Little did*** *they* ***know*** *what awaited them.*
- ***No sooner had*** *we* ***sat down than*** *the phone rang.*
- ***Hardly had*** *the match* ***begun when*** *it started to pour.*
- ***Only later did*** *she* ***understand*** *his warning.*
- ***Not only did*** *they* ***miss*** *the deadline, but they also lost the files.*

Key Point

Triggers include: *never, rarely, seldom, little, hardly … when, scarcely … when, no sooner … than, not only, not until, under no circumstances, on no account, at no time, nowhere, only + adverbial (only then, only after…, only by…).* If there is no auxiliary, supply *do/does/did*: *Seldom* ***does*** *he complain.*

Common Error

Inversion applies only when the negative element modifies the whole clause and stands first. ✗ *Never I have seen such chaos.* → ✓ *Never have I seen such chaos.* And with *only + subject*, there is no inversion: *Only Maria knew the code.* (not ✗ *Only did Maria know*)

Style & Register

Negative inversion is emphatic and somewhat literary. One instance electrifies a paragraph; three in a row read like a melodrama. Use it sparingly, at genuine climaxes.

18.2 Other inversions

- *So + adjective … that*: ***So severe was*** *the drought* ***that*** *rivers vanished.*
- *Such + be … that*: ***Such was*** *the demand* ***that*** *the site crashed.*

- Fronted place/movement adverbials with verbs of position and motion (full verb inversion): ***On the hill stands*** *a ruined tower.* ***Out of the mist appeared*** *a ship.* ***Here comes*** *the bus.* (Not with pronoun subjects: *Here it comes.*)
- After *as* and *than* in formal comparison: *She excelled in physics,* ***as did*** *her sister. City dwellers spend more* ***than do*** *their rural counterparts.*
- Conditional inversion (*Had I known. . .*) — see Chapter 17.

18.3 Fronting

Any element can move to the front for contrast or flow, usually *without* inversion:

- Object fronting: ***Some of his claims*** *I accept;* ***others*** *I find absurd.*
- Complement fronting: ***Beautiful*** *it certainly is — practical it is not.*
- Whole clause as given information: ***That she was brilliant*** *nobody denied.*

Fronting works best when the fronted element links back to the previous sentence (see Chapter 24 on information flow).

18.4 Cleft sentences

Clefts split one message into two clauses to spotlight one element.

18.4.1 *It*-clefts

It + *be* + *focus* + *that/who*-clause:

- Neutral: *Marie discovered radium in 1898.*
- Focus on agent: ***It was Marie who*** *discovered radium.*
- Focus on object: ***It was radium that*** *she discovered.*
- Focus on time: ***It was in 1898 that*** *she discovered radium.*

The *it*-cleft asserts its focus and presupposes the rest — ideal for correcting: *It wasn't me* ***who*** *broke the printer; it was the intern.*

18.4.2 *Wh*-clefts (pseudo-clefts)

What-clause + *be* + focus:

- ***What*** *this town* ***needs*** ***is*** *a decent library.*
- ***What*** *she did* ***was*** *(to) resign on the spot.*
- Reversed: *A decent library* ***is what*** *this town needs.*
- With *all* (= the only thing): ***All*** *I want* ***is*** *five minutes of quiet.*

Wh-clefts suit speech and set up the focus as the answer to an implied question (*What does this town need?*). Variants: *The reason (why). . . is that. . . ; The place where. . . is. . . ; The person who. . . is. . .*

Common Error

✗ *The reason is because. . .* — redundant in careful style: → ✓ *The reason is that. . .* or simply ✓ *. . . because. . .*

Exercises

Exercise 18.1 Negative inversion

Rewrite beginning with the word(s) in brackets.

1. I have never heard such nonsense. (Never)
2. The results were published only after two years. (Only after two years)
3. We had hardly left the house when it began to snow. (Hardly)
4. You should not open this door under any circumstances. (Under no circumstances)
5. She not only speaks five languages but also plays three instruments. (Not only)

Exercise 18.2 Clefts

Rewrite to emphasize the underlined element, using the cleft type in brackets.

1. The manager approved the budget. (it-cleft)
2. I admire her honesty. (wh-cleft)
3. The show becomes interesting in the second act. (it-cleft)
4. We just need a little more time. (All. . .)

Exercise 18.3 Spot the error

Correct any errors of inversion; one sentence is already correct.

1. No sooner we had arrived than the trouble started.
2. So was strong the wind that trees were uprooted.
3. Little he knew about what the day would bring.
4. Only when the test ended did the students relax.
5. Not until 1920 women could vote in the United States.