Inversion

The auxiliary verb comes before the subject in several different structures. This is usually referred to as ‘inversion’.

Examples

Never have I seen such a mess!

Not only do I enjoy classical music, but I also have regular music lessons.

An inversion generally begins with a negative word or phrase.

Negative Adverbials

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.

Time expressions: never, rarely, seldom

These time expressions are usually followed by perfect verb forms or modal auxiliary verbs.

Seldom have I seen anything more remarkable.

Never have I seen such a vast crowd.

Time expressions: hardly, barely, no sooner, or scarcely

These time expressions are used to talk about two past events that happen one after the other.

Hardly had she arrived, when problems started.

Scarcely had I sat down when the doorbell rang.

No sooner had he finished dinner, than he started feeling ill.

Sentences beginning with ‘only’ also follow an inverted word order.
Only then did I understand what I had done.
Only after her death was I able to love her.

After ‘Little’

Little is a negative word. Sentences beginning with little also have an inverted word order.

Little did she understand what she was doing.
Little did I realize the danger I faced.

Inverted Conditional Forms

In conditional clauses, an auxiliary verb can be put before the subject instead of using if.

Were I you, I wouldn’t do it. (= If I were you, I wouldn’t do it.)
Had I understood the problem, I wouldn’t have made those mistakes. (= If I had understood the problem, I wouldn’t have made those mistakes.)