Subject–Verb Inversion

**Subject-verb inversion** involves switching the sentence subject and the verb when another item has to occupy the first position of the sentence. That is, certain kinds of phrases, when put at the beginning of the sentence, force the subject to move. However, the verb cannot move very far, because it must remain as the second element of the sentence.

Imagine a typical English sentence consisting of “slots” in which we plug certain elements. The subject is usually first, then the verb, then other information like direct objects and other predicate information, and prepositional phrases. Linguists call these canonical, or standard, sentences.

*canonical sentence:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object / Predicate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Penguins live only in Antarctica and regions of the southern hemisphere.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Pred: Prep. Phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Penguins eat krill and herring.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Other items like conjunctions and many kinds of prepositional phrases and adverbs can come before the subject, and are often set off from the subject by a comma in writing or a brief voice pause in speaking.

First, I want to welcome you to the 25th annual conference on Antarctic research. Since 1975 we have come together from all fields to share knowledge and findings on this area. Every year we have expanded our knowledge of Antarctic life. But we study other things besides just biology. In addition, we also study the oceanography and climate of the region.

However, certain kinds of items occupy the first slot only and force the subject to move after the verb.

In the room sauntered a king penguin.

Oftentimes with a verb in a simple tense (especially simple present), the verb is augmented with the helping verb (auxiliary) *do*. We then have a sentence order like so:

*Initial element + Aux. verb + Subject + (main) Verb*

This allows the verb (in its first Aux. part) to stay in second position of the sentence, and to still follow the subject (in its second part). This is because verbs prefer to occupy second position *and* to come after subjects.
Under no circumstances do I travel to Antarctica without a good coat.

Never have we done bungee jumping.

Syntacticians describe many various non-canonical word order sentences as inversion, such as those described in this handout, while in writing studies, inversion refers more narrowly to adverbial fronting structures that are used for a certain transitional effect. Subject–verb inversion occurs in the following kinds of constructions.

1. Adverbial fronting

An adverb or phrase with an adverbial meaning is put in initial position. This puts a little more emphasis on the fronted word or phrase, and also provides a logical transition from the preceding sentence to the current sentence. These include adverbs of frequency (*seldom, rarely, always*), adverbs of extent or degree (= how much), and prepositional phrases of location or direction. In such cases, the subject–verb inversion is most commonly used with (1) intransitive verbs expressing existence, appearance, motion, or change of state (*be, stand, exist, grow, come, remain, walk, spring, slip, melt, die...*), and (2) passive verbs (*be arranged, be arrayed, be strewn, be found...*).

Often in narrative writing, and sometimes in academic writing, these fronted structures are used to provide a smooth and vivid transition to a topic that is closely related to the context. Usually the narrative builds up gradually to the transition, so inversion is not suitable for sudden transitions. This structure highlights the fronted element – often a prepositional phrase, participle phrase, adjective phrase, or adverbial phrase, and backgrounds the subject somewhat by placing after the verb, thereby bringing about a smoother transition.

1.1. Fronting for topic transitional effects

*Directional & locative prepositional phrases*

Into the room ran a king penguin.

In the garden stands an oak tree.

Upon the roof scurried the two squirrels.

On the roof was found a bloody scarf.

Upon the ceiling was found a strange stain.

With such prepositions, the subject–verb inversion occurs if the locational or directional phrase occurs first in the sentence, and it indicates existence or appearance of the subject with respect to the speaker’s point of view. With such prepositional phrases, the inversion is optional with most verbs, but is required with *be*.

Into the room a king penguin ran. → Into the room ran a king penguin.

Out of the house Russ stepped. (away from the speaker’s frame of reference)

Out of the house stepped Russ as he moved toward the stranger. (into speaker’s frame of reference)

In the garden an oak tree stands. → In the garden stands an oak tree.

In the garden is an oak tree.
**Participle phrases**
These are especially common in narratives that gradually build up suspense and introduce new elements to the story.

*Lurking* in the corner stood a chicken with an ax, ready to take on the farmer in a fight to the death.

**Adjective phrases**
Often these may be modified by adverbs of degree or extent, or emphatic adverbs like *especially*.

His manner was so absurd that everyone laughed at him.  
So absurd was his manner that everyone laughed at him.

Inverted sentences are especially interesting.  
Especially interesting are inverted sentences.

**Comparison phrases**

What he said was more important than what he accomplished.  
More important than what he accomplished was what he said.

1.2. Other fronted elements

**Adverbs of frequency**
Some adverbs of frequency (*seldom, rarely, often*) at the front of the sentence require inversion; this places more emphasis on the adverb.

He seldom brushes his teeth.  
Seldom does he ever brush his teeth.  
Often he goes out without his labtop.

**Conjunctive adverbs**
Some adverbs function to link two clauses and require inversion.

He didn’t like herring salad, nor did he like raw herring.

**Conditional inversion**
A different kind of inversion can be made to create a more formal alternative for conditionals. The *if* is deleted and an auxiliary verb is put at the beginning of the *if*-clause instead. This is for hypothetical conditionals, that is, contrary-to-fact conditionals. For present or future conditionals, *were* is used, and *had* for past conditionals.

If I were a millionaire, I would travel all over Europe.  
Were I a millionaire, I would travel all over Europe.

If he hadn’t wasted so much money on buying lottery tickets, he could have payed his bills.  
Had he not wasted so much money on buying lottery tickets, he could have payed his bills.
2. Questions

Questions are typically formed by a simpler type of inversion – putting an auxiliary verb or modal verb at the front for yes/no questions, or an interrogative word followed by an auxiliary or modal verb.

Can you tell an emperor penguin from a king penguin?
Do you know the difference between an emperor penguin and a king penguin?
What is the difference between a king penguin and an emperor penguin?

However, when such a phrase is embedded as a clause in another sentence, it is a noun clause and does not use inversion. A noun clause functions as a subject or object of the verb in the main clause.

What is a rock-hopper penguin?
Do you know what a rock-hopper penguin is?

3. There sentences

There has uses in English. Unlike other languages, there and here cannot function like pronouns in English, as subjects or direct objects. Instead, it works more like an adverbial. First, here and there function as non-specific location expressions, and in fact substitute as pro-forms for locations just as pronouns substitute for full nouns. They usually occur in predicates. The more indefinite terms somewhere, anywhere also function in the same way.

I like it there. (= in that place)
We like it here. (= in this place)

There also occurs at the front of the sentence before the verb. In such cases it is not a real subject. Instead, it is an adverbial pro-form (like a pronoun, it substitutes for a location phrase or such), functioning as a dummy subject or fake subject. The real subject follows after the verb. Such sentences are called there sentences, and are used to present a new topic, item, or piece of information into the discussion. Its sole function is to present new information represented by the actual subject after the verb. There sentences cannot be made with any verb, but only intransitive verbs that express existence, appearance, change of state, or motion. Usually a there-sentence requires another element after the main verb, such as a prepositional or descriptive phrase.

There’s a unicorn in my garden!
There flashed a bolt of lightening across the sky.
There arose such a clamor downstairs.
There came a woman from Ipanema, and she sang like a siren.
There she was walking down the street, singing “doo waa diddy, diddy dum diddy do.”
There appeared a fat man in a red suit with a long, white beard in my living room.
Appendix: Verbs in there sentences and adverbial fronting

The following intransitive verbs can easily occur in there sentences and prepositional phrase fronting.

verbs of appearance
appear, arise, awake, break, come, dawn, derive, develop, emanate, emerge, erupt, evolve, exude, flow, form, grow, gush, open, plop, result, rise, spill, spread, stem, stream, surge, wax

verbs of existence
dwell, endure, exist, extend, flourish, languish, linger, live, loom, lurk, persist, predominate, prevail, prosper, remain, reside, stay, survive, thrive, wait

existential verbs
be, seem, tend

verbs of occurrence
ensue, happen, occur, recur, transpire

verbs of location
balance, bend, bow, crouch, dangle, flop, fly, hang, hover, jut, kneel, lean, lie, loom, lounge, nestle, open, perch, plop, project, protrude, recline, rest, rise, roost, sag, sit, slope, slouch, slump, sprawl, squat, stand, stoop, straddle, swing, tilt, tower

verbs of change of state
(break): break, chip, crack, crash, crush, fracture, rip, shatter, smash, snap, splinter, split, tear;
(bend): bend, crease, crinkle, crumple, fold, rumple, wrinkle;
(cooking): bake, boil, broil, cook, dry, grill, heat, parch, perk, poach, roast, scald, simmer, steam, stew, toast;
(color): blacken, brown, gray, redden, tan, whiten, yellow
(disappearance): die, disappear, expire, lapse, perish, vanish
(-en verbs): awaken, brighten, broaden, cheapen, coarsen, dampen, darken, deepen, fatten, flatten, freshen, gladden, harden, hasten, heighten, lengthen, lessen, lighten, loosen, moisten, neaten, quicken, quieten, ripen, toughen, sharpen, shorten, sicken, slacken, soften, steepen, stiffen, straighten, strengthen, sweeten, thicken, tighten, toughen, waken, weaken, widen, worsen
(-ify verbs): acidify, intensify, liquefy, magnify, petrify, purify, putrefy, solidify
(-ize verbs): crystallize, energize, harmonize, ionize, magnetize, neutralize, oxidize, polarize, stabilize, vaporized
(-ate verbs): accelerate, coagulate, degenerate, deteriorate, disintegrate, dissipate, evaporate, levitate, operate, proliferate, propagate
(internal change of state): blister, bloom, blossom, burn, corrode, decay, deteriorate, erode, ferment, flower, germinate, molt, rot, rust, sprout, stagnate, swell, tarnish, wilt, wither
(others): abate, advance, age, air, alter, atrophy, awake, balance, blur, burn, burst, capsize, change, char, chill, clog, close, collapse, collect, compress, condense, contract, corrode, crumble, decompose, decrease, deflate, defrost, degrade, diminish, dissolve, distend, divide, double, drain, ease, enlarge, expand, explode, fade, fill, flood, fray, freeze, frost, fuse, grow, halt, heal, hat, hush, ignite, improve, increase, inflate, kindle, light, loop, mature, melt, multiply, overturn, pop, rekindle, rupture, scorch, sear, short, short-circuit, shrink, shrivel, singe, sink, soak, sprout, steep, stretch, submerge, subside, taper, thaw, tilt, tire, topple, triple, unfold, vary, warp
verbs of motion
(directional motion): bounce, coil, drift, drop, float, glide, move, revolve, roll, rotate, slide, spin, swing, turn, twirl, twist, whirl, wind
(manner of motion): amble, bolt, bounce, bound, bowl, canter, cavort, charge, clamber, climb, clump, coast, crawl, creep, dart, dash, drift, file, flit, float, fly, frolic, gallop, gambol, glide, hasten, hike, hobble, hop, hurry, hurdle, inch, jog, journey, jump, leap, lilt, lumber, lurch, march, meander, mince, mosey, parade, perambulate, plod, prance, promenade, prorl, race, ramble, roam, roll, romp, rove, run, rush, sashay, saunter, scamp, scoot, scram, scramble, scud, scurry, scutter, scuttle, shamble, shuffle, skedaddle, skip, skitter, skulk, sleepwalk, slide, slink, slither, slouch, sneak, somersault, speed, stagger, stomp, stray, streak, stride, stroll, strut, stumble, stump, swag, sweep, swim, tack, tear, tiptoe, toddle, totter, travel, trek, troop, trot, trudge, vault, waddle, wade, walk, wander, whiz, zigzag, zoom
(directed motion): advance, arrive, ascend, come, depart, descend, enter, escape, exit, fall, flee, go, leave, plunge, recede, return, rise, tumble

sensory verbs
(light): beam, blaze, blink, burn, flame, flare, flash, flicker, glare, gleam, glimmer, glitter, glow, scintillate, shimmer, shine, sparkle, twinkle
(sound): babble, bang, beat, beep, bellow, blare, blast, boom, bubble, burble, burl, buzz, chatter, chime, chink, chug, clang, clank, clap, clash, clatter, click, clink, clomp, clunk, crack, crackle, crash, crak, crunch, cry, ding, dong, explode, fizz, fizzle, groan, growl, gurgle, hiss, hoot, howl, hum, jangle, jingle, knell, knock, lilt, moan, murmer, patter, peal, ping, plop, plunk, pop, purr, putter, rap, rasp, rattle, ring, roar, roll, rumble, rustle, scream, screech, shriek, shrill, sing, sizzle, snap, splash, splatter, sputter, squawk, squeak, squeal, squech, strike, swish, swoosh, thud, thunder, thump, thunder, thunk, tick, ting, tinkle, toll, toot, tootle, trill, trumpet, twang, undulate, ululate, vroom, wail, wheeze, whine, whir, shish, whistle, whoosh, whump, zing
(smell): reek, smell, stink
(substance emission): belch, bleed, bubble, dribble, drip, drool, emanate, exude, foam, gush, leak, ooze, pour, puff, radiate, seep, shed, slop, spill, spout, sprout, spurt, squirt, steam, stream, sweat