Inversion

Which of the underlined sections of the following paragraphs sound better? Do some sound just as good as the others? Why?

1. You're driving along the highway, enjoying the drive. The air feels cool. The sun is warm but not too hot. The road is clear and you can drive as fast as you want. Then another car appears in your rearview mirror, zooming along like a bullet. The maniac comes up from behind and passes you like a rocket.

2. You can drive as fast as you like in the outside lane on a German highway and may feel like the king of the road – until you look in the rear mirror. Zooming in on you like a guided missile comes a rival contender, bullying you to get out of the way.

3. You can drive as fast as you like in the outside lane on a West German highway. But this freedom brings problems of its own. You miss your exit. You lose control on a tiny bump. Zooming in on you like a guided missile comes a rival contender, bullying you to get out of the way.

4. You're driving along the highway, enjoying the drive. The air feels cool. The sun is warm but not too hot. The road is clear and you can drive as fast as you want. Then in your rearview mirror there appears another car, zooming along like a bullet. Like a rocket, the maniac comes up from behind and passes you.

5. You're driving along the highway, enjoying the drive. The air feels cool. The sun is warm but not too hot. The road is clear and you can drive as fast as you want. Then in your rearview mirror appears another car, zooming along like a bullet. Like a rocket, the maniac comes up from behind and passes you.

6. You're driving along the highway, enjoying the drive. But then you notice that your air conditioner doesn't work. The air feels hot and dry, as the hot sun bears down on you. Birds have left deposits on your car hood. Insects are splattering on your windshield like raindrops. Then in your rearview mirror there appears another car. Like a rocket, the maniac comes up from behind and passes you.

What is special about most of the above underlined sentences? In which cases do sentences with this special kind of word order work well? In which cases do they seem awkward?
The sentences illustrate what we call inversion – placing a prepositional phrase, adverbial phrase, adjectival or participial phrase at the beginning of the sentence, followed by the sentence subject, and then an intransitive verb. If it is a prepositional phrase, it is generally a phrase indicating direction or location, or a time phrase.

Inversion cannot be used to make an abrupt transition to an entirely new subject or item. But as in the above examples, it can help the flow from one sentence to another sentence which introduces something new but related to the preceding context. So in sentences like #3 and #6, using inversion seems awkward, because the new subject (the zooming car) is not related to the immediate context. In most of the other sentences, it works well, because it segues or flows from one scene to another different but contextually related subject or scene. It makes for a smooth transition in writing and formal speaking between related items.

So inversion is essentially a transitional device. Just like transition words (then, thus, after, etc.) indicate logical relationships between items, inversion can indicate a smooth transition to a new but related item. Compare the sentences with good use of inversion to sentence #1. The first sentence is a very plain sentence, with the basic word order of SUBJECT - VERB - PREDICATE. Notice how much better the inverted sentences sound – they impart a smoother and more logical flow.

Note: Optionally, the subject can be preceded by there. There-expressions before a main verb (there is, there appears) is restricted to certain intransitive verbs: (1) verbs of existence, occurrence, and location (is, exist, stand, seem, tend, happen, occur), (2) verbs of appearance (appear, come, arise), and (3) verbs that indicate a change in state or condition (die, rise).

Here’s a summary of inverted sentence order:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{prepositional phrase} & \quad \text{adverbial phrase} \\
\text{adjectival phrase} & \quad \text{participial phrase}
\end{align*}
\] + (there) + intransitive verb + subject

Think about how would you use these sentences in context. Try to write a short paragraph for each sentence.

1. In the corner stood a chicken with a knife, ready to take on the farmer in hand-to-hand combat.
2. Coming up from behind you is a maniac in a chicken suit with a baseball bat.
3. More interesting are inverted sentences, like this one.
4. Especially interesting are inverted sentences when you don’t expect them.