

Buy Used Car

In the market for a used car? Use this free check list.

Use this checklist to evaluate any used car or used trucks you are considering buying.

Preliminaries

When you are ready to buy a used car wear old clothes. Bring a rag for handling greasy or dirty items. If desired, also bring clean paper towels and a container of hand-cleaner for cleaning up after performing the inspection.

Other items to bring:

- flashlight
- small magnet
- notepad
- pen or pencil
- copy of this checklist

Tips

- If you are meeting a private party, try to get there 15 to 20 minutes early. You may discover the vehicle being prepared for your visit. Try to get the seller to set a time for you to see the car or truck when it has been sitting overnight. You want to see how it will start first thing in the morning, and if any smoke comes from the tailpipe.
- Always try to inspect during the day, when you can see better than at night.
- Don't be afraid to ask the seller to help or show you something.
- Take time to perform an inspection to your satisfaction. Don't hurry or let yourself be rushed.
- At some point during a test drive, try to drive at 20 to 30 mph beside a solid center median or beside a solid side wall. Open the window halfway and listen for sounds of the vehicle echoed by the hard surface. You should only hear the sound of the tires on the roadway.
- For practice, inspect a vehicle you already own. Doing so will familiarize you with the process and also provide a reference point for the vehicle you are considering for purchase.
- Check the local newspaper, used car lots, and Internet for prices to get a comparable prices before you inspect the car you are considering.

Exterior

YES	NO
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<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Body

Are seams where doors and fenders meet even and straight?

Are seams where the hood and trunk meet the fenders even and straight?

Does a magnet cling to all steel body panels? (Be sure to test fenders, the lower corners of doors, and rocker panels-the areas below doors. If a magnet doesn't cling, suspect body filler was used to repair rust or accident damage.)

☐ ☐

Are all body panels the same color?

☐ ☐

Has the car been recently repainted? (Look for signs of spray paint on moldings; also check the edges of the doors, hood, and trunk to be sure they are all the same color. Fresh paint may cover rust that will continue to progress.)

YES NO

Tires

☐ ☐

Do all tires have the same amount of tread?

☐ ☐

Are all tires the same size? (Check tire size markings on tire sidewalls.)

☐ ☐

Are all tires the same brand?

☐ ☐

Is there a spare tire, jack, and lug wrench? If the vehicle has locking hubcaps, is there a key for removing them?

☐ ☐

Is the spare tire inflated (Press hard against the side with your thumb; the tire should be firm.)

YES NO

Suspension

☐ ☐

Does the vehicle sit level?

☐ ☐

Bounce each corner of the vehicle. Do all corners respond the same? (Corners should only bounce once or twice before stopping.)

☐ ☐

Do you hear a creaking noise when bouncing the vehicle's corners?

YES NO

Frame

☐ ☐

Examine inside trunk, wheel wells, and under hood. Do you see areas that look like they have been crumpled and straightened?

☐ ☐

Look underneath each side of the vehicle for a row of holes in the frame just inside the vehicle's outer edge. Do holes appear scratched or recently cleaned? (If so, suspect the frame has been straightened after a crash.)

YES NO

Gas Cap and Filler Neck

☐ ☐

Is there a gas cap? Does it fit correctly? (If the cap locks, is there a key?)

☐ ☐

Remove the gas cap and check inside the filler neck. Is there a fuel-nozzle restrictor to prevent adding leaded fuel? (Most states require them.)

YES NO

Interior

☐ ☐

Is upholstery in good condition? (Look for tears, stains, and burns.)

☐ ☐

Are the dashboard and headliner in good condition?

☐ ☐

Do seats adjust easily?

☐ ☐

Are any window cranks, door locks, handles, dash controls or similar items missing?

☐ ☐

Do all interior lights and dash bulbs work?

☐ ☐

Does carpet condition match the age of the vehicle?

☐ ☐

Does carpeting smell of mildew or stale water, suggesting moisture underneath (or worse, flood damage)?

☐ ☐

Check under the dash at the top of the carpet. Are there stains suggesting heater core or air conditioner leakage?

YES NO

Accessories

☐ ☐

Do all accessories, such as the heater, air conditioner, audio system, and alarm system, operate fully? Test all functions of each.

YES NO

Engine Compartment

☐ ☐

Are there signs of oil or fluid leaks?

☐ ☐

Run the engine at full operating temperature. Are there abnormal smells that might be due to leaking fluids on hot engine parts?

☐ ☐

Are there unusual noises, such as clattering or metallic sounds, or sharp hissing, in the engine compartment when the engine is running? (Normal sound is smooth whirring of belts and fan.)

☐ ☐

Does anything appear to be missing? (Look for shiny or clean areas where parts may have been removed.)

YES NO

Under the Vehicle

☐ ☐

Are there fluid leaks on the underside of the engine and transmission, at axle ends, at brake line connections, or on the ground beneath the vehicle? Green fluid is usually antifreeze; reddish fluid is usually power steering or transmission fluid; dark brown or black fluid is usually oil or brake fluid.

☐ ☐

Are any parts loose, with the exception of exhaust parts slung from flexible rubber "donuts"?

☐ ☐

Does anything appear missing, such as bolts, clamps, brackets or cables?

☐ ☐

Are exhaust system parts rusty?

☐ ☐

Are there marks from scrapes, indicating the car has bottomed out on rocks or pavement?

☐ ☐

Examine exhaust when the car is operating at normal temperature. Do you see white or blue smoke? (Both can indicate an engine problem, especially if the smoke burns your eyes. A small amount of steam is normal, especially in cold weather.)

Performance

YES NO

Engine

☐ ☐

Does the engine start easily?

☐ ☐

Does the engine stall at any time?

☐ ☐

Does the engine idle smoothly?

☐ ☐

Does the idle speed seem too slow or fast?

☐ ☐

Does the engine hesitate or stumble on acceleration?

☐ ☐

Does the engine run smoothly during operation?

☐ ☐

Does the engine seem to lack power?

☐ ☐

If the vehicle has cruise control, do all features work correctly?

☐ ☐

Do engine or other system warning lights appear?

☐ ☐

Does the engine diesel (continue running) when shut off?

YES NO

Transmission and Clutch

☐ ☐

Is automatic shifting smooth?

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | On a manual-shift vehicle, is take-off smooth, without grabbing or jerking? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | On a manual-shift vehicle, accelerate hard in a higher gear (third or fourth) or while going uphill. If engine rpms rise without a corresponding increase in vehicle speed, the clutch could be slipping. It may need to be adjusted or replaced. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | On a manual-shift vehicle, try shifting to a lower gear when going slowly. Does the transmission shift easily, without grinding? |
-

YES NO

4-Wheel Drive

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Engage 4-wheel drive only on soft surfaces unless the owner's manual specifically says the feature can be used on hard-surfaced roads. On a suitable surface, test-drive the vehicle in forward and reverse with 4-wheel drive engaged. Does the vehicle shift smoothly in both directions? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Turn tight corners to the right and left. Are there clunking sounds or other noises? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Do the wheels bind or pull, whether turning or going straight? |
-

YES NO

Brakes

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Apply the brakes several times at different speeds. Also try a sudden stop. Does the vehicle pull to one side when brakes are applied? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Do brakes stop the vehicle adequately? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | If the vehicle has antilock brakes (ABS), try stopping suddenly. Do wheels lock? (A pulsing brake pedal is normal.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the parking brake hold firmly and release completely? |
-

YES NO

Steering

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the vehicle pull to one side during normal operation? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Is steering difficult at any speed? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Turn sharply in both directions. Do you hear clunking or other noises, or feel rubbing or binding? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the vehicle shake or vibrate while moving? (Take the vehicle up to freeway speed for this test.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Is the steering wheel centered when the vehicle is traveling straight ahead? |