

Used Car Pre-Purchase Checklist

Use this checklist to evaluate any used car you are considering buying. Following this checklist, prepared by Identifix, assures you will cover all the bases when checking out a vehicle.

Preliminaries

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
- CARFAX Vehicle History Report - The first step to protecting yourself against buying a used car with costly hidden problems

Tips

- If you are meeting a private party to look at a vehicle, 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 vehicle when it has been sitting overnight. You want to see how it will start first thing in the morning.
- Always try to inspect vehicles 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 vehicles you are considering for purchase.
- Refer to the CARFAX Vehicle History Report to determine if the vehicle has any issues that may effect your purchase decision.

Exterior

YES NO

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.)

YES NO

Performance

- _____ 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?
- _____ On a manual-shift vehicle, is take-off smooth, without grabbing or jerking?
- _____ 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.
- _____ 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

- _____ 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?
- _____ Turn tight corners to the right and left. Are there clunking sounds or other noises?
- _____ Do the wheels bind or pull, whether turning or going straight?

YES NO

Brakes

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

YES NO

Steering

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

YES NO

Other Concerns

- _____ Is there evidence of flood damage? By law, this information should be on the title. Signs are upholstery and carpet stains, odor, rust in normally dry areas such as beneath the dashboard and inside the glove compartment, powdery green or white residue inside lowest electrical connectors.
- _____ Is the owners' manual in the vehicle? How about the operating instructions for any accessories, and any warranty information that still applies to items like tires and exhaust?
- _____ Are previous repair and service records available? (Complete records are a sign that the owner has taken good care of the vehicle.)
- _____ Does seller have clear title to vehicle?

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