



Used Car Inspection Checklist

Use this 50-point checklist as a guide to buying a used car
Print it and take it with you as you shop

Wheels and Tires

- Are tires worn to unsafe level (less than 2/32" tread depth at lowest point)?

Tires with less than 2/32" tread depth at lowest point are unsafe and should be replaced immediately. Less than 4/32" is unsafe in rain. Less than 6/32" is unsafe in snow. Hint: Buy cheap (\$5) tire tread depth gauge at any auto parts store, Walmart, or Sears

- Are left/right tires worn unevenly on front? On rear?

Unevenly worn tires on left and right are unsafe and can cause handling problems. It might indicate a bent or twisted frame. Always replace tires in pairs

- Are tires same size on all four wheels?

*Except on some high-end sports cars, all tires should be the same size to avoid stability, wear, and safety problems. Hint: Size is marked on tires' sidewall as something like **225/50R16**, or a variation of this marking*

- Is there visible tire damage — sidewall indentations, dents, bubbles (bulges), or exposed steel lining?

Damaged tires are dangerous and could fail while driving, and should be replaced immediately, always in front or rear pairs

- Is any tire tread worn unevenly?

Tire treads worn only on one side usually indicates an alignment problem or frame warp; in middle or on both sides usually indicates incorrect tire pressure

- Do wheels have damage? Are any wheels bent? Is there tire/wheel vibration when car is driven at higher speeds?

Wheel damage as a result of hitting a pothole or curb (expensive to fix) can cause imbalance and vibrations at speed. Vibration can also be caused by tires out of balance (inexpensive to fix)

- Do wheels have all lug nuts? Are they tight?**

Missing or improperly installed lug nuts are a serious safety issue

Brakes

- Do brakes work properly? At low speed? At high speed? Feel soft and spongy? Squealing or grinding sound? Jerky? Pulls car to one side?**

Brakes should be inspected by a professional mechanic or specialist. Common problems are worn shoes or pads, worn rotors, leaking fluid lines, low fluid level. Properly working brakes are important to the safety of the driver, his passengers, and other drivers

- Does the parking brake work properly?**

The parking brake should be able to hold the car on an incline, or stop the car in an emergency. Test by putting the transmission in Drive and moderately applying gas. If it doesn't hold, it should be adjusted by a mechanic

- How is the brake fluid level?**

Check the fluid level (in the engine compartment) to see that it comes up to the indicated "full" mark. If not, there may be a hard-to-find leak in the brake line

Body and Paint

- Are there major dents, paint chips, cracks, or scratches on the car's body? Is there rust in the dent, chips, or scratches?**

Minor chips and scratches are easily repaired, and minor dents can be "pulled" out. Paint cracks may indicate need for repaint job. Major dents may require expensive complete replacement or repair/repainting of large body components. Multiple dents and dings may indicate hail storm damage

- What is the condition of car's paint? Bright or faded and dull?**

Faded and weather-worn paint may indicate a need for repainting soon

Does the entire car appear to have been repainted? Or have large sections been repainted? If so, does the job appear to have been done professionally?

If a newer model car, why was it repainted — accident repair? If not done well, a repainted car may need to be repainted again in the near future. Hint: Check for different colored paint under hood, inside door jams, and on inside trunk lid

Is there rust on bottom panels or under wheel wells? Under hood? In trunk?

Rust may indicate operation in a winter climate where salt is used on roads. It might also indicate a car that has been partially submerged in water. Heavy rust is expensive to repair

Are there signs of water or flood damage — mud or corrosion in engine compartment, musty smelling interior carpets, rust in trunk?

Be aware of "flood cars" being sold after major weather events, but usually in another part of the country from where the event occurred

Are seams even and consistent width between body and hood, body and trunk lid, and body and doors?

Uneven seams between body components may indicate poor repair of collision damage

Broken headlight lens, taillight lens? Fogged headlight lens?

Broken lens can be relatively expensive to replace. Fogged lens can sometimes be cleaned with inexpensive repair kits from auto parts stores

Do all door handles work properly? Door and trunk keys work? Remote keys work? Hood latch work? Hood and trunk close properly?

Replacing handles or keys can be relatively expensive, especially remote keys

Electrical and Electronic

Do all external and internal lights work? Turn signals? Brake lights? Emergency flashers? If not, is it simply a burned out bulb or something more serious?

Burned out headlights and other bulbs may not be easy to self-fix on newer cars. If not a bulb problem, it might be a more serious, harder to fix wiring problem. Non-working lights, including license plate light, can result in police attention and fines

Does the audio system work — radio, CD player, speakers, satellite radio (if available)? Does retractable radio antenna work properly?

Audio system problems can be expensive to repair

Does the navigation system work properly (if available)? If an older system, has the map data been updated since the car was purchased?

Verify proper navigation system operation during a test drive. Old map data will contain outdated street and POI data. Map updates can be purchased from a car dealer

Does the climate control system work properly — air conditioner, heater, vent control, temperature control, fan control, window defroster, heated seats (if available)?

Problems with a car's climate control system can be expensive to repair

Does horn work?

A car's horn is essential to a driver's safety in many situations and is therefore important that it work properly

Power equipment working properly -- power windows, seats, door locks, moon roof?

Broken power equipment can be expensive to repair

Windshield and Wipers

Chips or dings in windshield glass?

Minor chips and dings can usually be repaired. Larger problems and cracks will likely get worse and will require a relatively expensive windshield replacement

Windshield wipers work properly? High speed, low speed, intermittent? Does washer work?

Proper windshield wiper operation is essential to driver and passenger safety

Wiper blades in good condition? Wipe evenly without streaking?

Wiper blade condition can be determined by using the washer and wipers at same time to look for problems. Blade replacement is relatively cheap and easy

Does the windshield defroster work? Rear window defroster (if available)?

Proper operation of windshield and rear-window defrosters operation are important to safe car operation

Interior

What is the condition of front and rear carpets? Worn? Stained? Headliner?

Carpet stains can usually be easily cleaned. Damaged carpets or headliner can be expensive to repair or replace

What is the condition of the upholstery? Worn? Torn? Stained? Cigarette burns?

Upholstery stains can usually be easily cleaned. Damaged upholstery can be expensive to repair or replace

Any damage to dash, door panels, plastic components, center console, front seat backs?

Interior components can be repaired or replaced relatively inexpensively

Gauges

Do gauges work properly? Speedometer? Tachometer? Odometer? Coolant temperature? Oil pressure?

Tachometer should register as engine revs. Oil pressure should register even at engine idle. Speedometer and odometer should advance as car is driven. Coolant temperature should register about half-scale after engine warms up

Are any dash "problem lights" on?

Newer cars have a number of "problem notification" indicators that alert drivers to possible problems with the car's engine, oil pressure, brake system, emissions system, safety system, tire pressure, and other systems. Unfortunately, the lights don't give a good indication as to whether the problems are serious or not. Any such light or notification should be checked out by a dealer or professional mechanic immediately

Odometer

- Does the mileage on the odometer seem consistent with the car's age?**

About 15,000 miles per year for every year of a car's life is considered an "average" number of miles. A Carfax vehicle history report may help verify the accuracy of a car's odometer

- Does the mileage seem high or higher than average?**

Cars with high mileage are generally a higher risk for problems and should be inspected by a professional mechanic before making a buying decision. Even reliable car brands such as Honda and Toyota with high mileage should not be considered exempt from a mechanic's inspection

Engine

- Is the "check engine" light on?**

The "engine check" light can indicate one of at least a couple of dozen possible problems, some serious, some not so serious. The car's computer produces a "problem code" that identifies the problem and can be read with a OBD2 Code Scanner device. You can buy your own OBD2 scanner or take your car to a professional mechanic

- Does the engine make strange or loud sounds?**

Unusual or loud noises from a car's engine are not normal and should be investigated immediately by a professional mechanic. It could indicate problems as simple as a belt that is worn and needs to be replaced, to more serious problems that could mean pending engine failure

- How is the oil level? Has the oil been changed regularly and recently?**

Check the oil level dipstick in the engine compartment. If the oil level is low, it may indicate a leak or more serious engine problems. Older cars may "use" oil or have leaks that newer cars don't experience, but still run well as long as oil losses are routinely replaced. If the oil on the dipstick is dark and dirty, the owner has probably not maintained the car very well. This could be an indicator of other current or potential future problems

- Are there leak spots under the car where it's been parked?**

Oily spots under a car indicate possible oil leaks from the engine, oil filter, oil lines, or oil pan. It could also indicate leaks of other fluids such as transmission fluid or coolant

Transmission

Does the transmission shift smoothly and quietly at all speeds? If a manual transmission, do the gears and clutch work smoothly, without slipping? If 4-wheel drive, does the 4WD system engage and operate properly?

Transmission, clutch, and 4WD problems can be expensive to repair

Is automatic transmission fluid level (in engine compartment) at "full" level?

If not "full" it might indicate a leak or other problem, which needs to be checked by a transmission mechanic

Trunk

Is there a spare tire? Is it the proper size? Is it in good condition, properly inflated, and ready to use?

Some late model cars have "run-flat" tires and do not have a spare, but should have an "emergency repair" kit

Is there a jack and tire change tools?

The jack and tools may be located under the trunk mat or in a panel on the side of the trunk

Owners Manual

Does the car come with the original Owners Manual? Maintenance records? Inspection reports?

Having an owners manual is always a nice-to-have. It's difficult to impossible to find them elsewhere. Maintenance and inspection records are also nice to have as a record of how the car has been cared for

Title

Does the seller have the car's title? Is his name the same as the name on the title? Does the car's VIN number match the VIN on the title?

If there is no title, the car could be stolen. If the seller's name is not the name on the title, he cannot legally sell the car. VIN numbers on car and title should always match

Is the title "clean"? Is the title being held by a bank or finance company?

A car without a clean title should be suspect. It could indicate a salvage vehicle, lemon (manufacturer buyback), flooded, or a vehicle destroyed in an accident (and possibly repaired). If the seller stills owes money on a loan, the title may be held until his loan has been paid off. Until the loan has been paid, the title will have a "lien holder" status

Test Drive

Any unusual noises? Starts quickly and strongly? Idles smoothly? Vibrations? Steering pulling to one side? Good acceleration and performance? Brakes good?

Some problems found during a test drive could be easy to fix. Others could be more serious and suggest expensive repairs. Any problems should be investigated by a mechanic

Performs well on city streets and highway? On smooth streets and bumpy roads? High speed and low speed? Corners and straights? Stop and go? Forward and reverse?

Driving problems could be safety issues. Any problems should be investigated by a mechanic

Any problems with controls or gauges — turn signals, light switches, wiper controls, coolant temperature gauge, speedometer, odometer, seat position adjustments, internal lights, backup camera (if available), window controls, radio, navigation system (if available), climate controls, emergency flasher?

Problems with controls and gauges are relatively expensive to fix or replace

Vehicle History Report

Does the Vehicle History Report (from *Carfax* or *Autocheck*) indicate an accident, odometer rollback, or flawed title (lemon, salvage, flood)?

Vehicle history reports are not totally reliable or complete but can be useful. Beware of cars that have been in accidents or have had salvage titles. Improper repair can result in bent frames, cheap airbag replacements, non-standard or used repair parts, or other problems. Any such vehicle should be thoroughly inspected by a mechanic