

USED-CAR CHECKLIST

Popular Mechanics

TOOLS TO BRING



Flashlight



Jack



Jackstands



Code reader



Clean, white rags



Magnet

MAKE

MODEL

VIN

YEAR

MILEAGE

ASKING PRICE

SCAN-TOOL CODES (IF ANY)

KEY



Noted, but not serious



Cause for concern



Serious issue

DEAL BREAKER

Flee the premises.

THE BASICS

- | | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Is the owner's manual missing? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Are there large gaps in the service history or no records at all? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Do you suspect the mileage isn't legitimate? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| DEAL BREAKER | | |
| 4 Does the title include the word "salvage"? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

EXTERIOR

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5 Is there evidence of curb damage on the wheels? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 Are the windshield wiper blades damaged? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 Are any hubcaps missing, damaged or loose? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 Are all the tire pressures properly set? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 Is the paint faded or cracked? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 Are any panels a different shade or color? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 Are any of the panel gaps markedly different than the others? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12 Are any of the trim pieces loose or missing? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13 Does a magnet fail to adhere to the sheet metal? (Try several spots.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14 Are any of the tires a different brand or size? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15 Is there evidence of accident damage that has been poorly repaired? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16 Are lug nuts missing? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17 Are there any small dark spots or oily film on the bumper near the exhaust pipe? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18 Are there any small rust spots? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| DEAL BREAKER | | |
| 19 Is there rust everywhere? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

INTERIOR

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 20 Are there any tears or wear marks in the seats? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21 Are there any cracks, blemishes or broken trim? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 22 Are the spare tire, jack and tools damaged or missing? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 23 Do any of the windows go down or up slower than the others? Do they make noises? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 24 When the climate control is turned on, does the fan squeak or rattle or operate on only one speed setting? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 25 Does the air conditioning blow warm air? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 26 Turn on all the accessories (windshield wipers, radio, power mirrors, etc.). Do any fail to operate properly? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 27 Is the brake pedal worn more or less than the mileage on the odometer would suggest? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 28 Is there any rust or evidence of water in the spare-tire well? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 29 Does the sunroof operate slowly, as if it's struggling to move? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| DEAL BREAKER | | |
| 30 Is there a stale smell, like mildew or spoiled milk? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31 Is there evidence of water damage in the glovebox or under the rear seat? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

CHASSIS/UNDERBODY

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 32 Are any of the inner fender shields missing or broken? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 33 Put your knee on the bumper, bounce the car three times, then stop. Does the body move up and down more than two times? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 34 Is there uneven wear on any of the tires? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 35 Does oil coat any of the shock absorbers? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 36 Jack up the car and safely support it so the wheels are off the ground. Tug and push on the wheels. Is there any lateral play at the hub? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 37 Pull on the tie rods and the suspension mounts. Do you detect any movement? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 38 Are the brake pads and rotors worn out? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 39 Is there rust on any of the underbody surfaces? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 40 Check the engine bottom. Any sign of fluid leaks? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 41 What about transmission and differential leaks? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 42 Is there any bent or dented metal? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 43 Are there shiny marks on the pinch welds? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 44 Is there fluid seepage around the brake caliper or from the bottom of the brake drums? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 45 Check the ground under the car. Are there any puddles of oil or fluid? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 46 Look at the bottom of the radiator. Is it wet from coolant? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



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ENGINE

	Yes	No
47 With the engine off, squeeze the hoses (be careful, they may be hot). Do they feel stiff or brittle?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
48 Are there cracks in the belt(s)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
49 Are there any wires not covered by sheathing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
50 Are there any loose hose clamps?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
51 Are there any loose and corroded battery clamps?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
52 Is the battery more than 4 years old?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
53 Is there any sign of fluid leaks at the accessories (power-steering pump, brake reservoir)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
54 Any evidence of nesting mice or other animals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
55 Is the air filter dirty?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
56 Are fluid levels (power steering, brake, coolant, oil and transmission) below the minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
57 Check for oil change stickers. Is the car long overdue?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
58 Is there seepage at the bottom of the brake reservoir?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
59 Is there sludge in the bottom of the coolant reservoir?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
60 If the engine has a timing belt, is it older than 4 years? If unknown, answer "yes."	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

DEAL BREAKER

61 Put a drop of oil from the dipstick on a clean, dry rag. Does it appear goeey or black?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
62 Are there shiny metallic particles in the oil?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
63 Does the oil look milky or smell like gasoline?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
64 Remove the oil filler cap. Are there thick, black deposits in the cylinder head?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
65 Sniff the automatic transmission fluid dipstick. Does it smell burnt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
66 Wipe the dipstick on a clean, white rag. Are there a lot of black particles, or is the fluid dark?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

ENGINE, ADVANCED (REQUIRES A MORE RIGOROUS INSPECTION; CLEAR WITH OWNER FIRST)

67 Check the battery for parasitic drains. Is the standby current more than 75 milliamps?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
68 Check the voltage between the coolant and battery ground. Is it higher than 250 millivolts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
69 Plug in a scan tool. Are there any pending codes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
70 Pressure-test the cooling system. Does it leak?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

DEAL BREAKER

71 Do a compression test. Are any of the cylinders 25 percent lower or more than the highest?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
72 Do a cylinder leak-down test. Do any cylinders leak more than 15 percent?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

POWERTRAIN STARTUP

73 Are there any strange noises (belt squeak, exhaust leak)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
74 Turn the key to the "on" position. Do the warning lights fail to illuminate?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
75 Start the car. Do the warning lights remain on?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
76 Does the airbag light stay on or blink?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
77 Does the engine fail to settle into a consistent idle within a couple of minutes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
78 Automatic transmission: Put the car in drive. Does it clunk into gear?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
79 Manual transmission: Depress the clutch. Does it feel stiff or jerky?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

ON THE ROAD

	Yes	No
80 Drive the car in tight circles in a parking lot. Does anything rub or clunk?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
81 Brake firmly. Does the pedal feel soft and mushy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
82 Does the feel of the brake pedal change (e.g., soft one stop, firm the next)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
83 Does the car veer to one side while braking?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
84 Drive over some bumps at normal speeds. Does the car bounce up and down after hitting a bump?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
85 Do you hear any loud noises from the suspension, such as clunks or creaks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
86 Get up to highway speeds. Is there any vibration?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
87 Is the steering wheel off-center when the car is going straight?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
88 Do you hear excessive wind noise?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
89 Do the interior pieces rattle over bumps?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
90 Does the car pull to one side?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
91 Accelerate briskly. Does the transmission jerk at the shift points?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
92 Does the car accelerate in fits and starts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
93 Manual transmission: Put the car in top gear while driving at 30 mph. Floor the throttle. Do the engine revs climb quickly, as if the clutch is slipping?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

DEAL BREAKER

94 Do you hear any knocking noises from the engine that get faster with higher engine speed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
95 Does the car feel tired, as if it's worn out?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

TEST DRIVE (WITH A FRIEND)

96 Have someone watch the headlamps and marker and brake lights as you operate them. Are any burned out?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
97 With your friend standing behind the car, start the engine. Is there sustained visible smoke?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
98 With your friend following, drive the car. Do the wheels wobble, or does the vehicle have an odd stance (e.g., it rides low in the rear)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
99 Is there smoke coming from the exhaust during acceleration?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

POST-TEST-DRIVE INSPECTION

100 Look under the hood. Do you hear a hissing noise?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
101 Check under the car again. Any sign of fresh fluid leaks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

WHAT IT MEANS

Number of "yes" answers	Conclusion
Fewer than 5	<i>Probably a cream puff</i>
5 to 10	<i>Relatively easy to fix</i>
More than 10	<i>Potentially a time sink, but nothing serious</i>
Fewer than 5	<i>Nothing to fret about—it's a used car</i>
5 to 10	<i>Enough DIY fix-its to last a year</i>
More than 10	<i>Just walk away</i>
Fewer than 3	<i>Make a lowball offer</i>
3 to 6	<i>Proceed with extreme caution</i>
More than 6	<i>Abandon all hope, ye who enter here</i>

DEAL BREAKER

One or more deal breakers: **Dodge this bullet.**

