

Used Car Test Drive Checklist

Before you drive

- Get the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) so you can check the vehicle history report at www.dmv.org or with another vehicle history report provider.
- Check the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's website at www.nhtsa.gov for any recall information. If there have been any recalls, ask the seller for proof the vehicle has been taken to a dealer or the manufacturer for any necessary changes.
- Map out a test drive route ahead of time that includes busy streets, freeways, hills, and a relatively empty parking lot.
- If you have a friend or relative who is experienced with cars, bring that person along for the test drive.
- If you are unfamiliar with how to do it, now is a great time to learn how to check engine oil, transmission fluid and engine coolant.

What to take with you

- Ruler
- Tire air pressure gauge
- MP3 player or favorite CD
- Safety seats for children, if you use them
- Friend or relative to help you go through the checklist

Engine

- Check the engine oil, transmission fluid and coolant levels when the engine is cool. Each should be within the appropriate levels and should be clean in appearance.
- Examine hoses and belts for signs of excessive wear.
- With the engine running, listen for any knocking, ticking or tapping.
- Smell the engine while it is running and pay attention to any burning smells.
- Ask to see a maintenance/service history, if the owner kept one. If there is none, factor this into your decision and use it in the price negotiation process.

Exterior

- Confirm the VIN. In more recent models it's usually visible at the bottom of the front window on the driver's side.
- Check the car's body for potential signs of undisclosed accidents, like unevenness in the paint or ripples or dents in the exterior.
- Check the ground beneath the car before and after the engine has been running to see if there are any fluid leaks.
- Take out your ruler and place it inside one of the grooves of the tire's tread. The tires should have at least ¼ inch of tread.
- Check the tires for signs of excessive or uneven wear, cracks or splitting.
- Make sure the tires have no objects lodged in them, like nails or screws.
- When you check for rust, pay special attention to the underside of the car, the wheel wells, the edges of doors and windows, and the trunk.
- Open and close all doors and listen for unusual sounds that could indicate damage to the doors or the frame of the car.

Interior

- Is it comfortable to sit in?
- Do the seat and steering wheel adjust?
- Are there any rips or stains on the seats?
- How does it smell?
- Play your CD or MP3 player to test the speakers.
- Do the heating and air conditioning work?
- Test the horn, turn signals, windshield wipers, door locks and dome lights.
- If you have a child who uses a safety seat, check to make sure your safety seat will work with the vehicle.
- Turn the key to the accessory position – the one right before the engine is engaged – and make sure all the dash warning lights illuminate.

Windows

- Are there any cracks that could develop into bigger problems?
- Do you hear any whistling noises when you are driving due to windows that don't close completely or faulty sealing?
- Do all the windows go both down and up?

Driving

- Is the car easy to start?
- Does the transmission shift gears smoothly?
- If the car has a manual transmission, is the clutch easy to engage and are the gears easy to shift?
- Briefly take your hands off the wheel while you are driving at a low speed. Does the car veer to one side?
- Does the car accelerate easily and quickly?
- Does the steering wheel rattle? Is the steering wheel responsive or do you have to turn it a lot to get the car to turn?
- When your car is idling at a stop sign or light, does the engine sputter? Does it lurch forward when you take your foot off the brake?
- Does the car vibrate excessively at high speeds?
- Does the cruise control work?
- Are there blind spots that could make lane changes difficult or dangerous?
- Is the car easy to park in tight spots?

- Intentionally hit a few bumps to see how the suspension feels on uneven surfaces.
- In an empty part of a parking lot, turn the wheel as far as it will go to both sides while you are driving and listen for any strange noises.
- While you are still in the parking lot, apply the brakes quickly and firmly while driving at 30mph. The car shouldn't swerve to one side, you shouldn't hear any strange noises, the brake pedal shouldn't feel squishy, and the brakes shouldn't pulsate.
- Look at the gauges while you are driving in the parking lot to make sure they all work and that no warning lights are on.

Other

- Does the car have a spare tire (in good condition), jack and tire iron?
- Is the trunk large enough for your purposes?
- Check that all the lights work, including the break and hazard lights.
- Open and close and lock and unlock anything that will – all doors, sunroof, trunk, glove box, etc.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions about maintenance, repairs, accidents or other key details. Be sure to ask how long the owner has had the car and why it is being sold.
- If you can afford to, have a trusted mechanic check out the car for you.

Notes
