



## What to check when shopping for a used car

### The exterior

- Paint is free of deep scratches and dents, and isn't blistering or peeling.
- No large rust patches; fresh paint might be an attempt to cover rust.
- Paint colors match on all panels; mismatched paint can be a sign of repairs.
- No gaps between body panels and bumpers; large gaps might be from accident damage.
- Magnet adheres to all steel body panels; if not, damage could have been repaired with filler.
- The windshield is free of cracks and chips.
- Windshield wipers are fully functional.
- Headlights and directional lights are intact and operational.
- Doors, trunk or liftgate work smoothly, close tightly and lock.
- The car rebounds, but doesn't bounce up and down, when pushed down on each corner (tests the shock absorbers).
- Tires are the same size and brand.
- Tires don't have uneven tread; uneven wear can be a sign of alignment issues.
- Tires aren't overly worn; a penny placed in the tread groove with Lincoln's head down shouldn't show the top of his head.
- No evidence of fluid leaks under the car.
- No rust on underbody surfaces.
- No obvious signs of damage, repairs or pieces hanging down beneath the car.
- The catalytic converter isn't missing; in states with emissions standards, the lack of a catalytic converter can cause a car to fail emissions testing.

## The interior

- Seats aren't overly worn and are free of cracks, tears and holes.
- Upholstery is free of large stains.
- All seats adjust properly.
- Seatbelts extend, retract and buckle.
- No signs of water damage under carpets.
- No signs of leaks around the windows or sunroof.
- Free of odors, musty or smoky smells; heavy air freshener scent could mean something is being concealed.
- All controls, gauges and indicators are functional.
- Windows and sunroof (if applicable) open and close.
- Warning lights illuminate and go off.
- Everything functions properly, including air conditioner, heater, hazard lights, turn signals, door locks and the sound system.
- Smart device pairing works (if applicable).
- Mileage on the odometer is reasonable for the car's age and condition; if not, the mileage could have been illegally rolled back.

## Under the hood

- Rubber hoses for the radiator, air conditioner and other parts are free of cracks and holes.
- Hoses don't feel too stiff, brittle or mushy; make sure the car is turned off and hoses are cool before touching.
- Belts aren't worn or frayed.
- Wires and hoses aren't hanging loose.
- Oil on the dipstick doesn't have water droplets or appear grey or foamy, which could indicate a serious problem.
- Oil is amber colored, not dark brown, black or gooey.
- No shiny metallic particles in the oil.
- No sign of fluid leaks on the bottom of the engine.
- Fluid levels (power steering, brake, coolant, oil and transmission) aren't low; fluids below the minimum level could indicate leaks.
- Battery terminals are free of corrosion; corrosion could indicate damage to other parts of the car.
- The radiator doesn't show signs of leaking; radiator fluid is green or orange and not milky or a rusty color.
- No evidence of mice or other nesting animals, which could have caused damage.

## When driving

- No clunking noise when putting the car into drive (for cars with automatic transmission).
- Drives smoothly and shifts gears as it should.
- Doesn't vibrate at highway speeds.
- Brakes are effective and don't make unusual sounds.
- Steering is smooth, responsive and returns to center after turns.
- No odd noises, squeaks or rattles; turn any music down to listen.
- For hybrid vehicles, the in-car display shows battery charging and discharging.
- For EVs, the estimated range displayed is close to the actual miles driven.
- Parking brake engages and disengages.
- No hissing noises under the hood or signs of fresh leaks after driving.

Finding a few of these items on a used car doesn't necessarily mean you shouldn't buy it. It isn't common to find a used car with no issues at all. But if your list is full of checkmarks, especially indicators of more serious problems, it's probably best to look for a different car.

Also, this list should never replace a professional inspection, but it can help you decide whether a car is worth the next step of paying for one.