Used car inspection checklist

Your own check first, then a pre-purchase inspection by an independent mechanic.
Look in daylight, on a dry day, with the engine cold.

milealot.com/guides/used-car-inspection-checklist/
Updated November 12, 2026

Vehicle (year, make, model, trim) _____ VIN (17 characters) _____ Odometer _____ Asking price _____

Papers, title, and recalls

- ☐ VIN matches: dashboard, door jamb, title, registration
- ☐ Open recalls checked by VIN: nhtsa.gov/recalls
- ☐ Title in the seller's name; no salvage, flood, rebuilt, or lemon brand; no lien
- ☐ Title report (NMVTIS): brands, total loss, last odometer
- ☐ Service records and receipts; odometer only goes up
- ☐ Dealer: Buyers Guide on the window (warranty or "As Is")

Outside

- ☐ No dents, rust, or paint that doesn't match
- ☐ Even gaps between panels; no paint on rubber seals
- ☐ Doors, hood, and trunk open and close; seals not torn
- ☐ Glass: no cracks
- ☐ All lights work; lenses not cracked or fogged
- ☐ Push down on each corner: bounces back once

Tires and wheels

- ☐ All four match: brand, model, size
- ☐ Tread at least 2/32" (quarter test for how much is left)
- ☐ Even wear; no wear on just one edge
- ☐ Sidewalls: no cuts, cracks, or bulges
- ☐ Tire age (DOT code, last 4 digits): _____
- ☐ Spare or repair kit, jack, lug wrench

Under the hood (engine cold)

- ☐ Oil not gritty; not gray, foamy, or with water drops
- ☐ Coolant, brake, and power steering fluid between the marks
- ☐ Transmission fluid (if there is a dipstick): level and color per manual
- ☐ Belts and hoses firm; no cracks or fraying
- ☐ Battery: no corrosion; date: _____
- ☐ No leaks or fresh oil spray

Inside

- ☐ No musty (water) or smoke smell
- ☐ Warning lights come on at start, then go out
- ☐ Seats, belts, windows, locks, mirrors, sunroof
- ☐ Heat and A/C blow hot and cold
- ☐ Radio, Bluetooth, phone connection
- ☐ Pedal and wheel wear match the miles
- ☐ No damp carpet, stains, or rust in the spare tire well

Under the car

- ☐ No puddles or stains where it was parked
- ☐ No black, greasy soot in the tailpipe
- ☐ Axle boots (CV boots) not torn
- ☐ No bent metal, new welds, or fresh undercoating

Test drive

- ☐ Starts easily cold; no warning lights stay on
- ☐ Smooth shifts; no slipping or hard clunks
- ☐ Brakes stop straight; no grinding or pulsing
- ☐ No pull to one side; no clunks over bumps
- ☐ No vibration at highway speed
- ☐ No smoke, burning smell, or new light after the drive

Mechanic's pre-purchase inspection

- ☐ Independent shop I chose; price confirmed: $_____
- ☐ Written report with problems and repair estimates
- ☐ Stored trouble codes read
- ☐ Brakes, suspension, frame, and leaks checked on a lift

Notes and repair estimates

Sources: Consumer Reports, Used car checklist to avoid costly repairs (March 2026) and How to protect yourself when buying a used car; FTC, Buying a used car from a dealer; NHTSA recall look-up by VIN; DOJ, NMVTIS. General information, not legal or mechanical advice. Free template from milealot.com. Milealot for iPhone (coming soon): log the car on day one and set reminders by miles or by date.