

AJSS AUTO CONSULTING LLC



Used Car Buying Checklist

Your complete step-by-step guide to inspecting, evaluating, and buying a used vehicle with confidence

50+ Checkpoints

15 Years Experience

Print & Use

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Don't Buy Until You've Checked Every Box

After 15 years in the automotive industry, I've seen buyers make the same costly mistakes over and over — skipping the inspection, trusting the seller's word, or falling in love with a car before checking the basics. This checklist prevents all of that. Print it out. Bring it to every lot.



Step 1

Research before you go — know the car's value and history



Step 2

Inspect in daylight, on a flat surface, no rush



Step 3

Get an independent mechanic inspection before signing

 **Pro Tip from AJSS:** Always run a Carfax or AutoCheck report before the in-person inspection. A \$40 report can save you thousands in hidden damage or title issues.



Need an expert eye?

Book a live vehicle evaluation consultation at ajssautoconsultingllc.com

Before You Visit the Seller



Run the VIN History Report

Use Carfax or AutoCheck. Look for accidents, title issues (salvage, flood, lemon), # of owners, and service records.



Check Market Value

Look up the car on KBB, Edmunds, and CarGurus. Know the fair private-party AND dealer retail price before you negotiate.



Research Reliability & Common Issues

Search "[year make model] common problems" and check owner forums. Know what you're walking into.



Verify the Seller's Listing Details

Cross-check mileage, year, trim, and VIN between the listing, the title, and the dashboard sticker. Discrepancies are red flags.



Check Recall Status

Go to nhtsa.gov/recalls and enter the VIN. Open recalls don't disqualify a car but they give you negotiating leverage.



Get Pre-Approved for Financing

Know your budget and monthly limit before you go. Dealers may try to focus your attention on payments, not price.



Watch Out: If a seller refuses to provide the VIN before meeting, or the VIN on the car doesn't match the title — walk away immediately.

Always inspect in natural daylight. Never buy a car you've only seen at night or in a garage.



Panel Gaps & Alignment

Walk around the car. Uneven panel gaps between doors, fenders, and hood can indicate prior accident damage or poor repair.



Paint Color Match

Look down the length of each panel at a low angle. Mismatched paint, orange peel texture, or overspray on trim means repaint — usually from a collision.



Rust & Corrosion

Check wheel arches, rocker panels, underside of doors, and frame rails. Surface rust is cosmetic; structural rust is a dealbreaker.



Glass & Seals

Check all windows for chips, cracks, and delamination. Inspect door seals — cracked or missing rubber lets in water and wind noise.



Lights & Lenses

Test all exterior lights (headlights hi/lo, turn signals, brake lights, reverse, fog). Check for moisture inside the headlight or taillight housing.



Tires & Wheels

Check tread depth (use the quarter test), even wear across the width, and age (look for cracking). Uneven wear = alignment or suspension issue.



Undercarriage Condition

Get on your phone's flashlight and look underneath. Look for frame welds, bent components, fresh undercoating (used to hide rust), and fluid leaks.



Bring a small magnet. Hold it under a plastic bag against body panels — if it doesn't stick, that area has had significant body filler applied (hidden accident damage).



Odor Check

Musty or mildew smell = water intrusion or flood damage. Smoke smell = heavy smoker (costly to remediate). Chemical smell = recent interior cover-up.



Dashboard Warning Lights

Start the car and watch what lights stay on. Check engine, ABS, airbag, TPMS, and oil pressure lights should all go off after startup.



Seat Condition & Adjustment

Test all seat adjustments (electric and manual). Check for tears, stains, and wear. Driver seat wear should match the claimed mileage.



All Controls & Switches

Test every button, knob, and switch: windows, mirrors, locks, AC/heat, wipers, horn, sunroof. Note anything that doesn't work.



Infotainment & Electronics

Test Bluetooth, backup camera, navigation, Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, and USB ports. Replacements can cost \$500–\$2,500.



Carpet & Floor Mats

Lift the floor mats. Look for rust, water stains, or soft spots in the flooring — signs of flood or leak damage hidden underneath.



Trunk & Spare

Check the trunk for water intrusion, rust, or smell. Confirm a spare tire, jack, and lug wrench are present and that the spare has usable tread.



If the seller has freshly detailed the car, be extra thorough — heavy cleaning can temporarily mask odors, stains, and leaks.

Check the engine cold if possible — a warm engine can hide leaks and starting issues.

☐ Oil Condition

Pull the dipstick. Oil should be amber/brown (not black), at the correct level, and with no milky color (which means coolant mixing — major engine issue).

☐ Coolant Level & Color

Check the overflow reservoir. Should be at the "full" mark and green, orange, or pink — NOT brown or rusty.

☐ Fluid Leaks

Look at the ground under the car and inside the engine bay for oil, coolant, brake fluid, power steering fluid, or transmission fluid leaks.

☐ Belt & Hose Condition

Check visible serpentine belts for cracking, glazing, or fraying. Squeeze radiator hoses — they should be firm, not soft or spongy.

☐ Battery Terminals

Look for corrosion (white or blue crust) on battery terminals. Check the battery age sticker — most batteries last 3–5 years.

☐ Air Filter

A clogged, dark air filter shows the car hasn't been regularly maintained. Easy and cheap to replace — but tells you a lot about how the car was cared for.

☐ Frame & Welds

Look at the frame rails inside the engine bay. Factory welds are uniform. Irregular or discolored welds indicate prior frame damage or repair.

💡 A compression test or OBD2 scan (using a \$30 bluetooth scanner) can reveal engine issues that won't show on a visual inspection or test drive. Ask if you can run one.

Minimum 20 minutes. Include highway speeds, city stops, and a parking lot at low speed. Drive it — don't just ride along.

☐ Cold Start Behavior

Start the car yourself from cold if possible. Rough idle, hesitation, or smoke on startup can indicate engine issues.

☐ Acceleration & Transmission

Feel for smooth power delivery. Automatic: shifts should be seamless. Manual: clutch shouldn't grab or slip. No jerking, hesitation, or shuddering.

☐ Braking

Test from moderate speed. No pulling to one side, no grinding, no vibration in the pedal. ABS should only activate in an emergency stop.

☐ Steering Feel

Hands lightly on the wheel — car should track straight with no pulling. Turn lock-to-lock: no clunking, grinding, or binding.

☐ Suspension & Ride Quality

Drive over bumps and railroad tracks. Clunking or banging = worn struts or ball joints. Excessive body roll = worn shocks.

☐ Noises & Vibrations

Listen at idle, under acceleration, braking, and turning. Note any clicks, rattles, whines, or vibrations and where they come from.

☐ AC & Heat Performance

Run the AC and heat at full blast. AC should cool within 2–3 minutes. A recharge costs \$100–\$200; a compressor is \$800+.

⚠ If the seller says "the car drives fine" but won't let you test drive it — that's a dealbreaker. No exceptions.



Get a Pre-Purchase Inspection

Before any money changes hands, have an independent mechanic inspect the car on a lift. Cost: \$100–\$150. Potential savings: thousands.



Use Defects as Leverage

Every item you found during inspection is a negotiating point. Get repair estimates and deduct them from your offer — in writing.



Negotiate the Out-the-Door Price

At a dealership, always negotiate the total price — not the monthly payment. Ask for an itemized breakdown of all fees before signing.



Review the Title Carefully

Make sure the title is clean, in the seller's name, and matches the VIN on the car. A salvage, rebuilt, or lien title changes everything.



Get Everything in Writing

Any promises made ("we'll fix the AC," "new tires included") must be on the purchase agreement before you sign — or it didn't happen.



Confirm Insurance Before Driving Home

Call your insurer before you sign. Don't drive an uninsured vehicle off the lot, even temporarily.



Walk Away If Something Feels Off

There will always be another car. Pressure tactics, rushed timelines, and "another buyer is coming today" are manipulation — not emergencies.



AJSS Rule: Never buy a car on the same day you first see it in person. Sleep on it. Good deals will still be there tomorrow.



Still Not Sure About a Car?

Book a 30-minute consultation with AJSS Auto Consulting. I'll review the vehicle history, walk through your inspection findings, and give you a straight answer on whether it's worth buying — and at what price.

USED CAR EVALUATION CONSULTATION

\$50

30-minute live session · Vendor-neutral advice · No upsells

- ✓ Review your VIN report together
- ✓ Evaluate your inspection findings
- ✓ Get a fair-market price assessment
- ✓ Honest buy / pass recommendation

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