USED-CAR CHECKLIST

Popular Mechanics

TOOLS TO BRING

Flashlight

Jack

Jackstands

Code reader

Clean, white rags

Magnet

MAKE		MILEAGE
MODEL		
VIN	YEAR	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?	☐	☐
2	Are there large gaps in the service history or no records at all?	☐	☐
3	Do you suspect the mileage isn't legitimate?	☐	☐
	DEAL BREAKER		
4	Does the title include the word "salvage"?	☐	☐

EXTERIOR

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

INTERIOR

20	Are there any tears or wear marks in the seats?	☐	☐
21	Are there any cracks, blemishes or broken trim?	☐	☐
22	Are the spare tire, jack and tools damaged or missing?	☐	☐
23	Do any of the windows go down or up slower than the others? Do they make noises?	☐	☐
24	When the climate control is turned on, does the fan squeak or rattle or operate on only one speed setting?	☐	☐
25	Does the air conditioning blow warm air?	☐	☐
26	Turn on all the accessories (windshield wipers, radio, power mirrors, etc.). Do any fail to operate properly?	☐	☐
27	Is the brake pedal worn more or less than the mileage on the odometer would suggest?	☐	☐
28	Is there any rust or evidence of water in the spare-tire well?	☐	☐
29	Does the sunroof operate slowly, as if it's struggling to move?	☐	☐
	DEAL BREAKER		
30	Is there a stale smell, like mildew or spoiled milk?	☐	☐
31	Is there evidence of water damage in the glovebox or under the rear seat?	☐	☐

CHASSIS/UNDERBODY

32	Are any of the inner fender shields missing or broken?	☐	☐
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?	☐	☐
34	Is there uneven wear on any of the tires?	☐	☐
35	Does oil coat any of the shock absorbers?	☐	☐
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?	☐	☐
37	Pull on the tie rods and the suspension mounts. Do you detect any movement?	☐	☐
38	Are the brake pads and rotors worn out?	☐	☐
39	Is there rust on any of the underbody surfaces?	☐	☐
40	Check the engine bottom. Any sign of fluid leaks?	☐	☐
41	What about transmission and differential leaks?	☐	☐
42	Is there any bent or dented metal?	☐	☐
43	Are there shiny marks on the pinch welds?	☐	☐
44	Is there fluid seepage around the brake caliper or from the bottom of the brake drums?	☐	☐
45	Check the ground under the car. Are there any puddles of oil or fluid?	☐	☐
46	Look at the bottom of the radiator. Is it wet from coolant?	☐	☐

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY DOGO

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Popular Mechanics

ENGINE

		Yes	No
47	With the engine off, squeeze the hoses (be careful, they may be hot). Do they feel stiff or brittle?	☐	☐
48	Are there cracks in the belt(s)?	☐	☐
49	Are there any wires not covered by sheathing?	☐	☐
50	Are there any loose hose clamps?	☐	☐
51	Are there any loose and corroded battery clamps?	☐	☐
52	Is the battery more than 4 years old?	☐	☐
53	Is there any sign of fluid leaks at the accessories (power-steering pump, brake reservoir)?	☐	☐
54	Any evidence of nesting mice or other animals?	☐	☐
55	Is the air filter dirty?	☐	☐
56	Are fluid levels (power steering, brake, coolant, oil and transmission) below the minimum?	☐	☐
57	Check for oil change stickers. Is the car long overdue?	☐	☐
58	Is there seepage at the bottom of the brake reservoir?	☐	☐
59	Is there sludge in the bottom of the coolant reservoir?	☐	☐
60	If the engine has a timing belt, is it older than 4 years? If unknown, answer "yes."	☐	☐
	DEAL BREAKER		
61	Put a drop of oil from the dipstick on a clean, dry rag. Does it appear gooey or black?	☐	☐
62	Are there shiny metallic particles in the oil?	☐	☐
63	Does the oil look milky or smell like gasoline?	☐	☐
64	Remove the oil filler cap. Are there thick, black deposits in the cylinder head?	☐	☐
65	Sniff the automatic transmission fluid dipstick. Does it smell burnt?	☐	☐
66	Wipe the dipstick on a clean, white rag. Are there a lot of black particles, or is the fluid dark?	☐	☐

ENGINE, ADVANCED

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

		Yes	No
67	Check the battery for parasitic drains. Is the standby current more than 75 milliamps?	☐	☐
68	Check the voltage between the coolant and battery ground. Is it higher than 250 millivolts?	☐	☐
69	Plug in a scan tool. Are there any pending codes?	☐	☐
70	Pressure-test the cooling system. Does it leak?	☐	☐
	DEAL BREAKER		
71	Do a compression test. Are any of the cylinders 25 percent lower or more than the highest?	☐	☐
72	Do a cylinder leak-down test. Do any cylinders leak more than 15 percent?	☐	☐

POWERTRAIN STARTUP

		Yes	No
73	Are there any strange noises (belt squeak, exhaust leak)?	☐	☐
74	Turn the key to the "on" position. Do the warning lights fail to illuminate?	☐	☐
75	Start the car. Do the warning lights remain on?	☐	☐
76	Does the airbag light stay on or blink?	☐	☐
77	Does the engine fail to settle into a consistent idle within a couple of minutes?	☐	☐
78	Automatic transmission: Put the car in drive. Does it clunk into gear?	☐	☐
79	Manual transmission: Depress the clutch. Does it feel stiff or jerky?	☐	☐

ON THE ROAD

		Yes	No
80	Drive the car in tight circles in a parking lot. Does anything rub or clunk?	☐	☐
81	Brake firmly. Does the pedal feel soft and mushy?	☐	☐
82	Does the feel of the brake pedal change (e.g., soft one stop, firm the next)?	☐	☐
83	Does the car veer to one side while braking?	☐	☐
84	Drive over some bumps at normal speeds. Does the car bounce up and down after hitting a bump?	☐	☐
85	Do you hear any loud noises from the suspension, such as clunks or creaks?	☐	☐
86	Get up to highway speeds. Is there any vibration?	☐	☐
87	Is the steering wheel off-center when the car is going straight?	☐	☐
88	Do you hear excessive wind noise?	☐	☐
89	Do the interior pieces rattle over bumps?	☐	☐
90	Does the car pull to one side?	☐	☐
91	Accelerate briskly. Does the transmission jerk at the shift points?	☐	☐
92	Does the car accelerate in fits and starts?	☐	☐
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?	☐	☐
	DEAL BREAKER		
94	Do you hear any knocking noises from the engine that get faster with higher engine speed?	☐	☐
95	Does the car feel tired, as if it's worn out?	☐	☐

TEST DRIVE (WITH A FRIEND)

		Yes	No
96	Have someone watch the headlamps and marker and brake lights as you operate them. Are any burned out?	☐	☐
97	With your friend standing behind the car, start the engine. Is there sustained visible smoke?	☐	☐
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)?	☐	☐
99	Is there smoke coming from the exhaust during acceleration?	☐	☐

POST-TEST-DRIVE INSPECTION

		Yes	No
100	Look under the hood. Do you hear a hissing noise?	☐	☐
101	Check under the car again. Any sign of fresh fluid leaks?	☐	☐

WHAT IT MEANS

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

DEAL BREAKER

One or more deal breakers: Dodge this bullet.