Used Car Buying Checklist

Check each box as you go. Used car rules vary by state, so check with your state attorney general or motor vehicle agency.

1. Set a budget and shortlist

- ☐ Set a total budget: price, taxes, fees, insurance, and a cushion for repairs.
- ☐ List what you need: mileage range, model years, seating, features.
- ☐ Narrow to a few models. If considering certified pre-owned, get the program details in writing.

2. Research the model, price, and recalls

- ☐ Read owner reviews and common problems for the model and year.
- ☐ Look up open safety recalls by VIN and ask if repairs were done.
- ☐ Compare prices for similar cars and check a valuation tool.

3. Find out what coverage comes with the car

- ☐ Ask whether any manufacturer warranty remains and whether it transfers.
- ☐ If there is a protection plan or service contract, read whether it can be transferred.
- ☐ For dealer sales, read the FTC Buyers Guide: warranty or “as is.”

4. Get a vehicle history report

- ☐ Run the VIN. Check accidents, title brands, flood history, liens, odometer readings, and owners.
- ☐ Remember a clean report is not a clean bill of health. Still inspect the car.

5. Inspect the car

- ☐ Exterior: scratches, dents, rust, mismatched paint, overspray, uneven tire wear, fresh leaks.
- ☐ Engine: leaks, oil level and color, belts and hoses, battery terminals, easy cold start, no smoke.
- ☐ Transmission: clean fluid, smooth engagement and shifting (clutch if manual).
- ☐ Interior: wear that matches mileage, locks, windows, belts, lights, wipers, heat and A/C, audio, warning lights.
- ☐ Spare tire and tools are present.

6. Check for water damage

- ☐ Musty smell, or a strong air freshener that may be hiding one.
- ☐ Water lines, stains, or dampness under carpet and in the trunk.
- ☐ Rust on seat bolts, hinges, latches, and hood springs.
- ☐ Silt or debris in hidden areas. New or mismatched carpet.
- ☐ Electrical systems all work. No buzzing, smoke, or burning smell.

7. Take a test drive

- ☐ Cold start. Smooth idle. No rough noise or smoke.
- ☐ Smooth acceleration and shifting. No hesitation or lunging.
- ☐ Steering centered. No pulling to one side.
- ☐ Brakes stop straight with no grinding, pulsing, or soft pedal.
- ☐ No knocking, creaking, or humming. Seat comfort, visibility, and noise at highway speed are acceptable.

8. Get an independent inspection

- ☐ Use a mechanic you choose, not one the seller picks.
- ☐ If the seller refuses an inspection, consider walking away.

9. Check the seller, price, and paperwork

- ☐ Seller has a good reputation and recent reviews.
- ☐ Title name and VIN match the seller, the car, and the history report. No lien.
- ☐ Price compared with similar cars and condition.
- ☐ Repair promises, fees, and coverage terms are in writing.
- ☐ Service records, owner's manual, spare key, and recall proof requested.
- ☐ Every document read before signing, including add-ons and fees.

Full guide: autopom.com/buying-a-used-car-checklist/

A vehicle protection plan (VPP) or vehicle service contract is a contract, not a warranty. The written contract controls what is covered.