



Buying a Used Car: Tips & Considerations

It is important to get the most from your investment when you are buying a used car! Before you agree to buy or set a purchase price, you should first determine whether the car is in good condition. The following guidelines will help you to evaluate your vehicle and make sure it is a “good buy”.

Check for vehicle condition! Be sure the following areas are operational and in good shape:

- **Fluid levels and leaks:** Automatic-transmission fluid should be clear or pinkish and should not look rusty. There should be no green stains on the radiator, which could be evidence of leaks. Low engine oil or transmission fluid is a sign of possible neglect.
- **Body integrity:** Look for rust, especially in the trunk, wheel wells, and rocker panels (under the doors). Bring along a small magnet and apply it to those areas. If it doesn't stick, you can suspect a hasty and temporary patch job with body putty. Look for signs of an accident, such as new welds, discolored surfaces, rippled body work, panels with mismatched colors, doors that don't fit properly, etc. A fresh paint job or fresh undercoating may be hiding something serious.
- **Tires:** If the car has less than 25,000 miles on the odometer, it should have its original tires and there should still be some useful tread. Bald or new tires could mean that the odometer has been turned back. Uneven tire wear could signal accident damage or poor wheel alignment. Make sure there are a usable spare tire and a jack, which are usually stored in the trunk.
- **Suspension:** Pull and push on the top of each front tire; any play or clunks could mean bad wheel bearings or suspension joints. Push down and quickly release each corner of the car; more than one or two bounces could mean worn shocks or struts. Look at the car from the rear and side; a lopsided stance could mean sagging springs.
- **Interior:** Seats shouldn't sag like an old chair, smell musty, or have ripped upholstery. Pedal wear should be accurate with the odometer's reading. See that safety belts and controls work. Check the trunk for mildew or moisture.

Request a test drive! Once you have checked that the car is in good condition, you should make sure that it is fully operational and safe to drive. You will need about 30 minutes for a thorough road test. Pick a clear, dry day for your test drive. Be sure your seat position is comfortable and that the controls are easy to see and reach. Pay attention to these items:

- **Steering:** With the ignition on but the engine off, there should be no more than two inches of play when you jiggle the steering wheel. Steering should be smooth and precise, with a minimum of vibration. A car that pulls to one side may need a simple wheel alignment or proper tire inflation, but it may have been in an accident or suffered body damage.
- **Engine:** Look for smooth acceleration and ample power for hills and passing. A ping or knocking sound is a sign of an out-of-tune engine and blue smoke means that the car is burning oil. A bit of puffy white smoke on a cold day is common, but a lot of smoke could signal a bad head gasket.
- **Transmission:** Shifting should be smooth. The transmission system may be worn if there is hesitation when the car is accelerating (automatic) or the clutch slips or doesn't engage smoothly (manual).
- **Brakes:** On a straight, traffic-free road, try a series of stops from about 45 mph. Possible warning signs for brake trouble include: strong pulling to one side, pedal vibration (unless they are antilock brakes), an abnormally long stopping distance. With the engine idling, step firmly on the brake pedal for 30 seconds. If it feels spongy or sinks, the brake system may have a leak.
- **Exhaust system:** Sputtering, rumbling, or a loud backfire could indicate a costly leak to repair.
- **Comfort and quiet:** Drive at 30 to 40 mph over a bumpy road. Excessive bouncing may point to suspension problems. Rattles and squeaks are hard to trace, so you may have to accept them.

Ask a professional! It is a good idea to hire a mechanic to complete a full inspection of the car before you agree to buy (approximate cost: \$60 to \$100). This is especially important and common when you are making a private sale, rather than a used car dealership. Make sure the mechanic performs a compression test and assesses any flaws you may have found previously. You can also ask the mechanic to give you a written estimate of any repairs, to help in negotiating a fair price.