



INSPECT & TEST DRIVE

Used Vehicle Inspection Checklist

A bumper-to-bumper walk-around that catches what a quick glance and a fresh detail are designed to hide.

A NOTE FROM OUR TEAM

A clean, shiny car tells you the detail department did its job. It doesn't tell you anything about the car. Take this checklist, a flashlight, and a penny, and give yourself thirty unhurried minutes. Anything you mark here is either a reason to walk or a reason to pay less.

— The Auto Advocate Team

This is the same order a seasoned used-car manager walks a trade: outside, tires, under the hood, inside, underneath, then start it. Work top to bottom, mark anything that bothers you, and write it down. A small note now becomes a big conversation at the desk later.

Year / Make / Model _____ Asking Price _____
VIN (last 8) _____ Odometer _____ Date _____
Seller / Dealership _____ Stock # _____

1 What to Bring

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ A bright flashlight (phone lights are not enough underneath) | ☐ A small magnet wrapped in a cloth (body filler won't hold it) |
| ☐ A penny for the tread test | ☐ An inexpensive OBD-II code reader, if you own one |
| ☐ Paper towels or a white rag to check fluids | ☐ This checklist, a pen, and someone to watch the lights |

2 Exterior Walk-Around

Look in good daylight, never in the rain or under showroom lights. Crouch down at each corner and look along the body panels for ripples.

CHECK	OK	FLAG	NOTES
Panel gaps even; fender and hinge bolts free of wrench marks			
Paint color and texture match panel to panel			
Overspray on rubber trim, glass edges, or wheel wells			
Magnet holds everywhere (no thick filler on steel panels)			
Rust bubbles at wheel arches, rocker panels, door bottoms			
Windshield free of cracks and large chips			
All glass carries the same brand markings (a mismatch suggests replacement)			
Headlight lenses clear, no moisture inside lamps			

3

Tires & Wheels

THE PENNY TEST

Place a penny in the tread with Lincoln's head upside down and facing you. **If you can see the top of Lincoln's head, the tires need replacing.** NHTSA considers tires unsafe once tread is worn down to **2/32 of an inch**, which is also where the molded wear bars sit level with the tread.

READ THE BIRTHDAY

The last four digits of the DOT code on the sidewall are the week and year the tire was made. "0321" means the third week of 2021. NHTSA notes some manufacturers recommend replacing tires six to ten years old regardless of tread.

TIRE	PENNY	DOT DATE	EVEN WEAR
Left front			
Right front			
Left rear			
Right rear			
Spare / repair kit present			

- ☐ All four tires same brand and size
- ☐ No cupping or inside-edge wear (alignment or suspension)
- ☐ Wheels free of cracks and heavy curb damage

MILEAGE CROSS-CHECK

NHTSA's odometer-fraud guidance says a vehicle showing **20,000 miles or less should still have its original tires**. Low miles on a car wearing a fresh set of mismatched tires deserves a question.

4

Under the Hood

Engine off and cool. You're not diagnosing; you're looking for things that don't belong.

- ☐ Oil on the dipstick is not milky, gritty, or sludgy
- ☐ Belts free of cracks; hoses firm, not soft or swollen
- ☐ Coolant at the proper level, not rusty or oily
- ☐ Battery terminals clean; note the date on the battery
- ☐ Transmission fluid (if checkable) not dark or burnt-smelling
- ☐ No chewed wiring, nests, or debris
- ☐ Brake fluid at the proper level
- ☐ Engine bay suspiciously spotless? Ask what was cleaned
- ☐ No fresh oil or coolant wetness on the engine
- ☐ Service stickers match the odometer timeline

5

Interior & Electronics

- ☐ Wear on pedals, steering wheel, and driver seat fits the mileage
- ☐ Every window, lock, and mirror operates
- ☐ Headliner clean, no sagging or water stains
- ☐ A/C blows cold; heat blows hot, all vents and modes
- ☐ Every seat adjusts; heated / cooled seats work
- ☐ Touchscreen, Bluetooth, and phone mirroring connect
- ☐ Seat belts pull out and retract smoothly
- ☐ Backup camera and parking sensors work
- ☐ Carpet dry under mats, including the trunk well
- ☐ All exterior lights, including brake and reverse lamps
- ☐ No smoke, pet, or heavy air-freshener odor
- ☐ Horn, wipers, washers, and rear defrost
- ☐ Both key fobs present (replacements can be costly)
- ☐ Sunroof opens, closes, and seals; drains not clogged

6

Underbody

- ☐ Surface rust only; no flaking or holes in frame rails
- ☐ Exhaust intact, no fresh patches or heavy soot
- ☐ No kinks, welds, or fresh undercoating on the frame
- ☐ CV boots and shock absorbers dry and intact
- ☐ No active drips from engine, transmission, or differentials
- ☐ No mud or silt packed into crevices (see flood signs)

7 Cold Start & Warning Lights

FROM THE INSIDE

Call ahead and ask the seller **not to start the car before you arrive**. A warm engine can hide a hard start, a rattle that only lasts a few seconds, or a puff of smoke. If you walk up and the hood is already warm, ask why, and give it less benefit of the doubt.

- 1 **Key on, engine off.** Watch the dash. Warning lights such as check engine, airbag, ABS, and oil pressure normally light up briefly as a self-check. **A light that never comes on at all** may have a burned-out or disabled bulb hiding a problem.
- 2 **Start it.** Listen for slow cranking, knocks, ticks, or squeals. Have a helper watch the tailpipe for blue smoke (oil) or thick white smoke that lingers (coolant).
- 3 **Let it idle.** Every warning light should go out within a few seconds. Idle should settle smooth and steady. Watch the temperature gauge reach normal and stay there.
- 4 **Scan it if you can.** A code reader can show stored codes and whether emissions "readiness monitors" are complete. Several monitors showing "not ready" can mean codes were recently cleared.

LIGHT ON AFTER START?	YES	NO	LIGHT ON AFTER START?	YES	NO
Check engine			Tire pressure (TPMS)		
Airbag / SRS			Battery / charging		
ABS / traction / stability			Oil pressure or temperature		

8 Flood Damage Signs

Flood cars get dried, detailed, and moved to markets far from the storm. NHTSA and the National Insurance Crime Bureau point to the same warning signs.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Musty or mildew odor, or heavy perfume covering one | ☐ Fog or moisture inside lights, gauges, or the screen |
| ☐ Water stains or a waterline on door panels or upholstery | ☐ Unusual rust or corrosion for the car's age and location: seat rails, pedal brackets, under-dash screws |
| ☐ Silt, mud, or sand under seats, in the spare-tire well, or behind trim | ☐ Electrical quirks: flickering lights, dead switches, warning lights |
| ☐ Mismatched or brand-new upholstery or carpet in an older car | ☐ Ran the VIN through NICB's free VINCheck |

WATCH OUT

NHTSA warns that hybrid and electric vehicle batteries **should not be exposed to standing water**, and that flooded vehicles can have high-voltage short circuits that can shock or cause fires. Treat any flood sign on an electrified vehicle as a hard stop until a qualified technician clears it.

9 Independent Pre-Purchase Inspection

This checklist tells you whether a car is *worth* inspecting. A trusted mechanic tells you whether it's worth *buying*. The FTC recommends paying for an independent inspection even if the car has been "certified," asking for a **written report with a cost estimate** for needed repairs, and considering another dealer **if one won't allow it**.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Mechanic chosen by me, not referred by the seller | ☐ Written report and repair estimate in hand |
| ☐ Inspection scheduled before any paperwork is signed | ☐ Open recalls checked by VIN at nhtsa.gov/recalls |
| ☐ Car put on a lift; codes scanned; brakes measured | ☐ History report reviewed (see No. 16, How to Read a Vehicle History Report) |

10 Questions for the Seller

Ask plainly and write the answers down. A good store answers these without hesitation.

How did you acquire this car (trade-in, auction, lease return)? _____

What reconditioning did you do? May I see the work order? _____

Are there service records, and are both keys and the manuals here? _____

Is it sold with a warranty or "as is" on the Buyers Guide? _____

Can my mechanic inspect it before I sign anything? _____

11 Your Verdict

FLAGGED ITEM	MECHANIC'S ESTIMATE	DEAL-BREAKER?
	\$	
	\$	
	\$	
Total estimated reconditioning cost	\$	

☐ **Walk away:** frame damage, flood signs, or a seller who blocks inspection

☐ **Negotiate:** real, documented costs the price doesn't reflect

☐ **Proceed:** clean inspection, clean history, fair price

☐ **Next:** drive it with No. 15, Test Drive Checklist & Scorecard

FOUND SOMETHING? USE IT.

Every flag on this sheet is leverage. Let us help you price it.

With the Buyer Brief, we pull a Carfax and dealer-grade bookouts on the exact unit, research rebates and incentivized rates, and build used-car offer support around what you and your mechanic found. You walk in with a number grounded in facts, not feelings.

Buyer Brief \$99

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THE DEALERSHIP HAS EXPERTS. NOW YOU DO, TOO.

SOURCES

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Tire Safety Ratings and Awareness: nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/tires

NHTSA, Hurricane- and Flood-Damaged Vehicles: nhtsa.gov/hurricane-and-flood-damaged-vehicles

NHTSA, Odometer Fraud: nhtsa.gov/equipment/odometer-fraud

NHTSA, Recalls (VIN lookup): nhtsa.gov/recalls

National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB), flood-damaged vehicle warning and VINCheck: nicb.org

Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Buying a Used Car From a Dealer: consumer.ftc.gov/articles/buying-used-car-dealer

FTC, What to know when buying a used car online (2024): consumer.ftc.gov/consumer-alerts

This checklist is an educational tool to help you organize your own observations. It is not a substitute for a professional mechanical inspection, and it is not legal or financial advice.