



INSPECT & TEST DRIVE

Test Drive Checklist & Scorecard

Drive it like you'll own it, score it while it's fresh, and compare with a clear head.

A NOTE FROM OUR TEAM

A test drive isn't a joyride, and it isn't the salesperson's route. It's your one chance to learn how this vehicle fits your real life before you owe money on it. Drive every car the same way, score it before you talk numbers, and let the scorecard settle the debate.

— The Auto Advocate Team

Most buyers spend more time choosing a paint color than actually driving the car. A real test drive takes 20 to 30 minutes, covers the roads you actually drive, and ends with a written score, not a handshake. Print one copy of this sheet for every visit.

1 Before You Leave Home

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Driver's license and proof of insurance in hand | ☐ Bringing what you'll carry: car seat, stroller, golf bag, tools |
| ☐ Appointment set for a specific vehicle (stock # or VIN) | ☐ Bringing your phone and cable to test phone pairing |
| ☐ Asked that the car not be warmed up before you arrive | ☐ Bringing the person who will drive it most |
| ☐ Planned your own route (Section 3), not just theirs | ☐ Used vehicle? Ran No. 14, Used Vehicle Inspection Checklist first |
| ☐ Open recalls checked by VIN at nhtsa.gov/recalls | ☐ Decided in advance: no numbers on today's visit |

FROM THE INSIDE

Many stores have a standard demo loop, and it's usually smooth pavement, right turns, and a quick return. That's not a conspiracy; it's efficiency. But it won't show you highway wind noise, a clunk over potholes, or how it merges up a short ramp. Politely say, "I've mapped a route that matches my commute. Is it OK if we take it?" A good salesperson will say yes.

2 Sit Before You Drive

Five minutes in the driveway tells you whether you'll love or hate this car in year three.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Seat and wheel adjust to a truly comfortable position | ☐ Rear seat fits real adults or your car seat installs easily |
| ☐ Clear view out: pillars, mirrors, rear window | ☐ Cargo area fits what you actually carry |
| ☐ Gauges and screen readable in sunlight and without glare | ☐ Phone pairs quickly; phone mirroring connects |
| ☐ Climate and volume controls work without hunting menus | ☐ Cold start is smooth; no warning lights stay on |

3 Your Route Plan

Cover every type of road in this table. Map it before you go so you aren't navigating while evaluating.

Road Segment	What You're Testing	Notes
Parking lot	Full-lock turns both ways (listen for clicks), tight parking, backing up with camera	
Neighborhood streets	Stop-and-go smoothness, low-speed shifts, brake feel, turning radius	
Rough road	Rattles, clunks, squeaks; suspension comfort over bumps and potholes	
Highway merge	Acceleration up a ramp, passing power, shifts under load	
Highway cruise	Tracks straight, no shimmy at speed, wind and tire noise, ride comfort	
Firm stop (safe, empty area)	Straight stop, no pulling, pulsing pedal, or grinding	
Hill or incline	Power on the climb, hill-hold, no rollback	

4 During the Drive: Listen, Feel, Smell

Listen

☐ Whine that rises with speed

☐ Clunks over bumps

☐ Grinding or squealing brakes

☐ Hum that changes in turns

Feel

☐ Pulling to one side

☐ Vibration in wheel or seat

☐ Harsh, slipping, or late shifts

☐ Soft or pulsing brake pedal

Smell & See

☐ Burning oil or sweet coolant

☐ Smoke from exhaust

☐ Temp gauge climbing

☐ Any light that comes on

Turn the radio off for the first half of the drive. Ask the salesperson to hold the feature tour until you're parked; you need your attention on the car.

5 Driver Assistance & Safety Tech Check

Confirm which systems this exact vehicle has (trim levels differ) and that each one works and makes sense to you. NHTSA is clear: today's systems are assistive, and "you, as the driver, are responsible for driving the vehicle." Observe them in normal driving; never set up a near-miss to test one.

System (NHTSA Term)	Equipped	Worked	Notes / How it Felt
Forward collision warning / automatic emergency braking			
Pedestrian automatic emergency braking			
Blind spot warning (lights in mirrors on lane change)			
Rear cross traffic warning / rear automatic braking			
Lane departure warning / lane keeping assistance			
Adaptive cruise control / lane centering assistance			
Backup camera image clear; parking sensors chime			
Automatic high beams			

USED VEHICLE? CHECK THE SENSORS

Cameras and radar sensors live in the windshield, grille, bumpers, and mirrors. A cracked windshield, aftermarket grille, or bumper repair can affect them. If a system shows "unavailable" or a warning appears, write it down and have your mechanic look before you buy.

6 After You Park

- ☐ Let it idle 2–3 minutes; check for new warning lights
- ☐ Look under the car for fresh drips
- ☐ Pop the hood: smell of burning oil or coolant?
- ☐ Fill out the scorecard **before** you go inside
- ☐ Take a photo of the window sticker or Buyers Guide
- ☐ Write down the stock # and the salesperson's name

WATCH OUT

Right after a great drive you're at your most emotional and least prepared, and that's when you'll hear, "Let's go inside and see what we can do." It's fine to say, "Thank you. I'm driving two others today." Keep your trade's keys in your pocket until you're ready to negotiate.

7 The Scorecard

Score each vehicle right after its drive. 1 = poor, 3 = acceptable, 5 = excellent. Add each column. Write any deal-breaker beside the total.

CATEGORY	VEHICLE A	VEHICLE B	VEHICLE C
Year / make / model / trim			
Seating, driving position & visibility	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Acceleration & merging	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Braking feel & confidence	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Ride comfort on rough roads	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Handling & steering	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Cabin quiet at highway speed	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Controls, screen & phone pairing	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Driver assistance & safety tech	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Rear seat & cargo fit for my life	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Condition (used): no noises, leaks, or lights	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Gut check: I'd be happy driving this daily	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Total score (out of 55)			

My top choice

Why

READY TO MAKE YOUR MOVE?

You picked the winner. Now walk in prepared to buy it right.

With Walk-In Ready, we locate the exact vehicle, tell you who to ask for and what to say, list the documents to bring, and can introduce you to lenders before you arrive. Your scorecard picks the car. We make sure the visit goes to plan.

Walk-In Ready **\$399**

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THE DEALERSHIP HAS EXPERTS. NOW YOU DO, TOO.

SOURCES

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Driver Assistance Technologies: nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/driver-assistance-technologies
NHTSA, Tire Safety Ratings and Awareness: nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/tires
NHTSA, Recalls (VIN lookup): nhtsa.gov/recalls
Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Buying a Used Car From a Dealer: consumer.ftc.gov/articles/buying-used-car-dealer

This checklist is an educational tool. Always drive lawfully and safely, follow the seller's requirements for license and insurance, and never test a safety system by creating a dangerous situation. Not legal or financial advice.