

Car Buying Checklist

A checklist for buying a car from start to finish.

Set your budget

- ☐ Decide a maximum total budget and a comfortable monthly payment.
- ☐ Include insurance, fuel or charging, maintenance and taxes.
The purchase price is only part of the total cost of ownership.
- ☐ Determine your down payment or trade-in value.
- ☐ Check your credit score before seeking financing.
- ☐ Avoid stretching the budget to a longer loan term.
- ☐ Leave room for registration, fees and an emergency fund.

Research the right car

- ☐ List your needs — size, seats, cargo, fuel type and use case.
- ☐ Compare models on reliability, safety ratings and reviews.
- ☐ Research typical pricing for the models you want.
- ☐ Check fuel economy or range and expected running costs.
- ☐ Look into insurance costs for shortlisted models.
- ☐ Read about common problems and recalls for each model.

Arrange financing

- ☐ Get pre-approved by a bank or credit union for a benchmark rate.
Pre-approval gives you leverage to compare against dealer financing.
- ☐ Compare the APR, loan length and total interest of each offer.
- ☐ Avoid focusing only on the monthly payment.
- ☐ Confirm there is no prepayment penalty.
- ☐ Decide on a cash, loan or lease approach.
- ☐ Have your trade-in valued independently before negotiating.

Visit and test drive

- ☐ Inspect the car's condition in daylight before driving.
- ☐ Test drive on varied roads, including highway speeds.
- ☐ Check comfort, visibility, controls and tech.
- ☐ Listen for noises and feel for vibration or pulling.
- ☐ Verify the features and trim match what is advertised.
- ☐ Test the parking, mirrors and driver-assistance systems.

Negotiate the deal

- ☐ Negotiate the out-the-door price, not the monthly payment.
- ☐ Get quotes from multiple sellers to compare.
- ☐ Negotiate the trade-in separately from the purchase price.
- ☐ Question and decline unwanted add-ons and dealer fees.
Some dealer add-ons carry high margins and little value — ask about each.
- ☐ Be prepared to walk away if the terms are not right.
- ☐ Get every agreed figure in writing before proceeding.

Close the purchase

- ☐ Review the contract line by line, including all fees.
- ☐ Confirm the price, financing and any included items match the deal.
- ☐ Verify the VIN, mileage and vehicle details on the paperwork.
- ☐ Arrange insurance to be active before you drive away.
- ☐ Complete the title transfer and registration.
- ☐ Collect all keys, manuals, receipts and a copy of every document.