Used Car Inspection Checklist

A checklist for inspecting a used car before you buy it.

Documents and history

- [ ] Confirm the VIN on the dash, door and engine bay all match each other.
- [ ] Check the VIN matches the title and registration documents.
- [ ] Run a vehicle history report for accidents, title and odometer data.
  A salvage, rebuilt or flood title can drastically reduce value and safety.
- [ ] Verify the title is clean and clear of outstanding finance or liens.
- [ ] Review service records for consistent, on-schedule maintenance.
- [ ] Confirm the seller's name matches the title and ID.

Exterior and body

- [ ] Inspect every panel in daylight for dents, rust and repaint.
- [ ] Check panel gaps and alignment for signs of accident repair.
  Uneven gaps or mismatched paint can indicate prior collision damage.
- [ ] Look for overspray, mismatched bolts or fresh underseal on the frame.
- [ ] Examine the windshield and glass for cracks and chips.
- [ ] Check tires for even wear and matching brands and dates.
  Uneven inner or outer wear often signals worn suspension bushings or an alignment problem.
- [ ] Inspect under the car for rust, leaks or frame damage.

Interior and electronics

- [ ] Check seats, carpets and trim for wear consistent with the mileage.
- [ ] Smell for damp, mold or strong air fresheners masking flood damage.
- [ ] Test all windows, locks, mirrors and the sunroof.
- [ ] Verify the air conditioning, heater and infotainment work.
- [ ] Confirm all warning lights illuminate then clear at start-up.
  If a light like Check Engine never turns on briefly at start, the bulb may have been removed.
- [ ] Check the odometer reading against pedal, seat and tire wear.

Engine and under the hood

- [ ] Inspect the cold engine for leaks, corrosion and frayed belts.
- [ ] Check oil on the dipstick for level, color and a milky film.
  A milky film can signal a head gasket or coolant problem — investigate further.
- [ ] Check coolant, brake and transmission fluids for level and condition.
- [ ] Look for fresh sealant or repairs hiding a leak.
- [ ] Watch the exhaust at start-up for blue, white or black smoke.
  Blue smoke indicates burning oil, while thick sweet-smelling white smoke signals burning coolant.
- [ ] Listen for knocking, ticking or rough idle once running.

Test drive

- [ ] Start cold and note any hesitation, smoke or warning lights.
  A pre-warmed engine can mask rough starting, weak batteries, and bad starter components.
- [ ] Test acceleration, smooth shifting and the clutch or transmission.
- [ ] Brake firmly to check for pulling, vibration or noise.
  A pulsing pedal usually means warped rotors, while pulling to one side suggests a sticking caliper.
- [ ] Drive at highway speed to feel for vibration or wandering.
- [ ] Test steering for play, pulling and a centered wheel.
- [ ] Listen for clunks over bumps and on turns at low speed.

Final checks before buying

- [ ] Arrange a professional pre-purchase inspection by an independent mechanic.
  An independent inspection is the single best protection against a costly used car.
- [ ] Get any agreed repairs or terms in writing before paying.
- [ ] Confirm all keys, the owner's manual and accessories are included.
- [ ] Verify the registration is current and transferable.
- [ ] Use your findings to negotiate the price down.
- [ ] Complete a written bill of sale and proper title transfer.