

Car Pre-Purchase Inspection Checklist

Complete Guide for Buying a Used Vehicle | 2026 Edition

Vehicle:

Date: _____

Mileage: _____

Seller:

Asking Price: \$ _____

VIN: _____

■ QUICK ANSWER — Car Pre-Purchase Inspection Must-Haves

- ✓ Check for rust, dents, and panel gaps on the exterior
- ✓ Inspect the engine for leaks, belt wear, and fluid levels
- ✓ Test all electrical components, lights, and A/C
- ✓ Examine tires for uneven wear (signals alignment/suspension issues)
- ✓ Run a vehicle history report (Carfax or AutoCheck)
- ✓ Have an independent mechanic perform a professional inspection
- ✓ Conduct a thorough road test covering city and highway speeds

1. Exterior Inspection

■ Panel gaps

Walk all 4 sides — uneven gaps indicate collision repair

■ Paint color match

Look down the car length from each corner for shade differences

■ Rust spots

Check wheel arches, rocker panels, door bottoms, windshield frame

■ Overspray on trim

Paint on rubber seals / trim = hasty re-spray covering damage

■ Dents & scratches

Note all dents; factor repair cost into your offer

■ Hail damage

Tiny dimples across hood / roof / trunk visible in bright light

■ Windshield / glass

Any chips or cracks? Windshield replacement = \$300–\$600

■ Door & trunk latches

All doors open, close, and latch properly without force

2. Tires & Wheels

■ Tread depth

Penny test: Lincoln's full head visible = replace immediately (<2/32")

■ Uneven tread wear

Edge wear = alignment issue; scalloping/cupping = worn shocks

■ Matching tires

All 4 ideally same brand/model; mismatched = budget repairs

■ Sidewall condition

No bubbles, cracking, cuts, or bulges on sidewalls

■ Wheel / rim condition

Check for curb rash, cracks, or bends; bent rims cause vibration

■ Spare tire present

Confirm spare inflated; check jack and lug wrench are present

3. Engine Bay — Inspect on a COLD Engine

■ Ask the seller NOT to start the car before you arrive.

A cold start reveals issues hidden once the engine warms up (e.g. blown head gasket, coolant leaks).

■ Engine oil

Should be amber/brown. Milky/frothy oil = coolant mixing = head gasket failure

■ Coolant level & color

At the fill line; no oil in coolant; not rusty or brown

■ Transmission fluid

Red/pink, no burnt smell; dark/black = harsh use or neglect

■ Brake fluid

Clear to light yellow; very dark = absorbing moisture, degraded performance

■ Power steering fluid

Correct level; burnt smell indicates pump wear

■ Oil leaks present

Look under car for stains; inspect valve cover, pan, hoses for seepage

■ Belts & hoses

No cracking, fraying, or glazing on belts; hoses firm — not spongy

■ Battery condition

No corrosion (white/blue crust) on terminals; ask age (replace every 3–5 yrs)

■ Starts immediately

Slow or reluctant start = battery, starter, or fuel system issue

- **Smooth idle**
Settles to steady RPM within 30 sec; no rough shaking
- **No warning lights**
All dash lights clear after 5 sec; note any that stay illuminated
- **Exhaust smoke color**
Blue = burning oil | White = coolant leak | Black = rich fuel mix
- **No knocking / ticking**
Knocking = low oil pressure or worn internals; expensive repair
- **No startup rattle**
Rattling on startup = possible loose timing chain (\$800–\$2,000+)

4. Undercarriage & Suspension

- **Frame / unibody damage**
Bent, welded, or freshly undercoated patches = structural concern
- **Undercarriage rust**
Surface rust is common; heavy flaking or holes in floor pans = serious
- **Exhaust system**
Check pipes and catalytic converter for holes, repairs, or heavy rust
- **Shocks & struts**
Fluid leaking from shock body = worn and needs replacement
- **Ball joints & bushings**
No excessive play; worn bushings cause clunking and handling issues
- **CV axle boots (FWD)**
Torn boots with grease slung around = safety hazard, replace soon
- **Brake lines**
Rubber lines supple; metal lines not corroded or kinked
- **Differential**
No leaks or whining sounds during steering lock-to-lock

5. Interior Inspection

- **Seat condition**
No tears or broken mechanisms; all seatbelt buckles engage securely
- **Musty / mildew odor**
Strong musty smell = possible flood damage; check for dampness
- **Headliner condition**
No sag or water staining (indicates leaking sunroof or door seal)
- **Dashboard & trim**
No cracks, warping, or missing trim pieces; check for repair patches

- **Floor carpet / mats**
Lift all mats — check for rust, staining, or hidden moisture

- **Sunroof operation**
Opens, closes, tilts, and seals fully; no leaking around seal

- **Trunk / cargo area**
Check spare well for water intrusion; look for rust or staining

- **Fuel or chemical odor**
Strong fuel smell = possible leak; sweet chemical = coolant

6. Electrical & Technology

- **All exterior lights**
Headlights (lo/hi beam), fog, brake, reverse, turn signals, hazards

- **Interior lighting**
All courtesy, map, and cargo lights illuminate

- **Dashboard warning lights**
Check Engine, ABS, Airbag, TPMS must clear after engine start

- **Infotainment / Nav**
Touchscreen responsive; GPS locks; Bluetooth pairs successfully

- **Backup camera**
Image sharp and clear; guidelines display correctly (if equipped)

- **A/C & heater**
A/C cold within 60 sec; heater hot; all fan speeds work; rear defroster on

- **Power windows**
Test each window from door switch AND master control switch

- **Power locks**
All doors lock/unlock from fob and interior button

- **Horn**
Works reliably; no weak or intermittent operation

- **Wipers & washers**
Both speeds work; blades clear in one sweep; fluid sprays evenly

- **OBD-II scan**
No current or pending fault codes; all readiness monitors set

- **Power seats / mirrors**
All adjustment directions functional; memory seats work (if equipped)

7. Test Drive — City, Highway & Parking Lot

- **Drive at least 20–30 minutes. Include stop-and-go, highway speeds, and parking maneuvers.**

Turn off the radio. Listen for any unusual sounds. A short test drive can hide intermittent problems.

- **Tracks straight**
Light hands on flat road — no pulling left or right
- **Steering feel**
Firm and responsive; no excessive play or vagueness in the wheel
- **Smooth acceleration**
No hesitation, stumbling, or surging under throttle input
- **Braking — straight line**
Car stops straight; no pulling, grinding, or pedal pulsation
- **Brake pedal feel**
Firm pedal, not spongy or traveling to the floor

- **Transmission shifts**
Smooth and decisive; no hunting, harsh clunks, or hesitation

- **No vibrations**
No steering wheel shake or seat vibration at any speed

- **No clunking over bumps**
Clunks = worn ball joints or sway bar end links

- **No squealing in turns**
Squealing during low-speed turns = worn CV joints

- **No highway howling**
Droning or howling at speed = worn wheel bearing

- **A/C stays cold**
Remains cold under highway acceleration load

- **Engine temp normal**
Gauge stabilizes in normal range; watch for overheating

8. Immediate Red Flags — Consider Walking Away

- **If ANY of the following are present, walk away or renegotiate significantly.**

These are not minor negotiating points — they represent major financial or safety risks.

- **Salvage / rebuilt title**
Only consider with heavy discount and complete documented history
- **Flood damage evidence**
Musty smell, water lines in trunk/door, rust under carpet, corroded fuses
- **Mismatched VIN numbers**
Compare dash VIN to door jamb and title — mismatch = fraud risk
- **Major frame damage**
Bent, welded, or patched structural frame members
- **Seller refuses inspection**
Legitimate sellers always welcome independent inspections

■ **Odometer discrepancy**
Inconsistency between the car and vehicle history report = rollback fraud

■ **Unexplained Check Engine**
Seller cannot explain a persistent warning light = concealed fault

■ **Coolant / oil mixing**
Milky oil or oil in coolant = likely head gasket failure (\$1,500–\$3,000+)

9. Professional Mechanic Inspection

■ **A \$100–\$200 inspection can prevent a \$2,000+ mistake. Never skip this step.**

Ask the mechanic to: put car on lift, run OBD-II scan, measure brake pad thickness, check compression, and pull stored fault codes.

■ **Independent mechanic booked**
Your choice of shop — no affiliation with the seller

■ **OBD-II scan completed**
Check current AND historic fault codes; verify readiness monitors are set

■ **Lift inspection done**
Full undercarriage, brakes, exhaust, and suspension reviewed

■ **Brake pad thickness measured**
Get exact mm reading — not just 'looks OK'

■ **Fluid condition tested**
Specialized test strips for coolant, brake fluid, and oil quality

■ **Written report received**
All findings and estimated repair costs documented in writing

10. Issues Found & Negotiation Notes

Issue Found	Repair Estimate	Priority (Safety / Minor)
_____	\$ _____	■ Safety ■ Minor
_____	\$ _____	■ Safety ■ Minor
_____	\$ _____	■ Safety ■ Minor
_____	\$ _____	■ Safety ■ Minor
_____	\$ _____	■ Safety ■ Minor
_____	\$ _____	■ Safety ■ Minor
_____	\$ _____	■ Safety ■ Minor

Asking Price:	\$ _____	Total Repairs:	\$ _____	My Offer:	\$ _____
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Final Decision: Buy It Negotiate Walk Away

◆ Condition Score Card

Area	Condition	Est. Repair Cost	Notes
Exterior / Paint	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Tires & Wheels	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Engine & Fluids	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Undercarriage	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Brakes	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Interior & Electrics	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Transmission / Drivetrain	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
A/C & Climate Control	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Test Drive Feel	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	
Professional Mechanic Findings	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor	\$ _____	

■ Important Reminder

This checklist is a buyer's guide and is not a substitute for a professional mechanic inspection. Always run a vehicle history report (Carfax / AutoCheck) alongside this checklist. A \$100–\$200 mechanic inspection is the best investment you can make before any used car purchase. © 2026 KE Offers | blog.keoffers.co.ke