

Captain Jim's Used Car Buying Companion Checklist

The Simple Inspection Guide Smart Buyers Bring to the Dealership

By Capt. Jim Timpson — helping car buyers make smart decisions for over 20 years



Why This Checklist Can Save You Thousands

Most used cars look good at first glance.

But small issues—ones that are easy to miss—can turn into expensive repairs after you buy.

A worn tire pattern, a hidden accident, or a small warning sign during a test drive can mean the difference between a smart purchase and a costly mistake.

This checklist helps you slow down, stay focused, and evaluate a vehicle with confidence.

INTRODUCTION

Most used-car buyers miss several important checks when inspecting a vehicle.

This checklist is designed to help you avoid expensive mistakes and feel more confident when evaluating a used car.

If a vehicle passes most of the checks on this list, there's a good chance you're looking at a solid purchase.

Use this guide when visiting a dealership, meeting a private seller, or reviewing a vehicle before making a final decision.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN IN THIS CHECKLIST

- Important research steps to complete before inspecting a vehicle
- Key documentation and vehicle history checks many buyers overlook
- Exterior and interior inspection points that can reveal hidden problems
- Mechanical signs that may indicate future repair costs
- Test-drive observations that help confirm a vehicle's true condition

Before You Start: Quick Wins

- Take your time — don't let anyone rush your decision
- Bring a flashlight and your phone for photos
- If possible, inspect the car in daylight
- Consider bringing a friend or second set of eyes

BEFORE YOU INSPECT THE CAR

- Check the vehicle's market value
- Research common problems
- Estimate insurance costs
- Confirm no recalls

DOCUMENTATION & VEHICLE HISTORY

- Verify VIN matches
- Run vehicle history report
- Confirm title ownership
- Check accident history
- Ask for maintenance records
- Review inspection reports
- Confirm Certified status

Captain Jim Tip: If paperwork feels unclear or incomplete, pause.

EXTERIOR INSPECTION

- Check paint differences
- Look for dents/rust
- Inspect tires
- Check lights
- Inspect glass
- Look underneath

INTERIOR INSPECTION

- Check seats
- Test electronics
- Test infotainment
- Check camera
- Check climate control
- Look for warning lights
- Check odors

UNDER THE HOOD

- Check oil
- Check fluids
- Look for leaks
- Inspect battery
- Check belts

TEST DRIVE OBSERVATIONS

- Starts easily
- No unusual noises
- Smooth shifting
- Straight steering
- Good brakes
- No warning lights
- Listen for sounds

Captain Jim Tip:

Turn off the radio to hear small noises.

BEFORE SIGNING ANY PAPERWORK

- Confirm final price
- Review warranty
- Confirm title
- Check financing
- Read paperwork

OPTIONAL VEHICLE SCORECARD

Documentation & History: _____

Exterior Condition: _____

Interior Condition: _____

Mechanical Condition: _____

Test Drive: _____

Total Score: _____ / 25


CAPTAIN JIM'S ADVICE

If something doesn't feel right, it's okay to walk away.

Need a Second Opinion?

Text CAR to 941-786-6122

CONTACT

 Call or Text: 941-786-6122

— Capt. Jim Timpson

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