Used Car Buyer's Checklist

Print this and take it with you. Look at the car COLD (engine not run yet), in daylight, and never let the seller rush you. Anything you can't check yourself - pay for a pre-purchase inspection. It's the best $100-200 you'll spend.

Paperwork first

- VIN on the dash, door sticker and title all match
- Run the VIN for open recalls (free on the DG317 site) and a history report
- Title is in the seller's name - no "salvage", "rebuilt" or "flood" brand
- Service records - oil changes, timing belt, transmission service

Walk-around

- Panel gaps even, paint color matches on every panel (repaint = past damage)
- Tires: same brand, even wear (inside-edge wear = alignment or suspension issues)
- Look under the car for fresh leaks, heavy rust, or a too-clean, freshly washed engine
- Glass not cracked; all lights work, including brake lights and turn signals

Under the hood (engine cold)

- Oil: not milky (coolant), not gritty, not overfilled to hide noise
- Coolant: right color, no oil film, reservoir not stained
- Belts and hoses not cracked; no fresh silicone or "patch" jobs
- Battery date and terminals clean

Inside + start-up

- All warning lights come ON at key-on, then go OFF after start (a light that never comes on may be disabled)
- Cold start: no rattle, knock or blue/white smoke
- A/C blows cold, heat blows hot, all windows/locks/seats work
- Plug in a cheap OBD-II scanner: check codes AND "readiness monitors" - if they're "not ready", codes may have just been cleared

Test drive (at least 15 minutes)

- Smooth shifts, no slipping or flare between gears
- Brakes straight and quiet, no pulsing pedal
- No pull or clunks over bumps; steering centered
- Highway speed - no vibration or wandering
- After the drive: look under again for drips

Walk away if: title problems, flood signs (musty smell, silt under carpet, rusty seat bolts), codes just cleared, or the seller won't allow an inspection. There's always another car.

More free tools: VIN + recall check, trouble code lookup and Ask A Mechanic on the DETAILGUY317 Garage site.