

BUYING A USED CAR

Buying a used car can be fraught, especially if you aren't mechanically minded. This guide helps you check the most common problem areas. Remember, though, if you have any doubts, it's always worth paying an expert to check the vehicle for you.

Before you buy

- If you are buying from a dealer, get your finance in place before choosing your car so you know your budget and options.
- Use whatcar.com's valuations service or the *What Car? Used Car Price Guide* so you know the price you should expect to pay before you go to the showroom.
- Don't limit yourself to specialist used car dealers. Consider buying a trade-in from a new car dealership or spying a good private sale. Always haggle.

Rules of thumb

- As a general rule, a car's average mileage is 10,000 miles per year. If it has done more, it might have led a hard life.
- Check that the number on the car's VIN plate and engine plate matches that given on the registration documents. It should not have been tampered with.
- You must test drive the car on a variety of road types, but ensure you are insured to do so first.
- Always take out a vehicle history check to find out details of outstanding finance, whether the vehicle has had its mileage changed or is an insurance write-off and whether it is stolen.

Rust checks

- Bodywork is best checked in good light and from the inside and outside of the car. Rust is most obvious on wings, sills and below bumpers. If you find rust, press gently on it – if there is a cracking sound, it indicates corrosion below.
- Look for signs of rust under the wheel arches, the back of the under bonnet area, at the corners of the windscreen or around the door frame. If there are, get an expert to check these areas.
- Any brake pipes showing signs of rust will need replacing.

Accident damage

- Look at the car from every angle. If the doors and wings don't match up, the car has almost certainly been in an accident and not been repaired well. Look for irregularities in the paintwork, too, such as subtle changes in paint colour, 'runs' or ripples. Check suspect areas with a magnet to see if filler has been used to repair rusty areas. Always view a car when it's dry, as raindrops can hide problems.
- When driving the car, the steering should be straight with no tendency to pull to the left or right.

How old is the car?

- Check the odometer - if the numbers are out of line, the mileage may have been altered.
- Does the mileage correspond with the general condition of the car? Look for wear on the brake pedal and gear lever, a shiny steering wheel or sagging seats as tell-tale signs of high mileage.
- If the condition is good and the car has unusually low mileage, check that it hasn't sat unused for long periods or only been used for short journeys. Both can cause engine problems.

Under the bonnet

- A dirty engine area may suggest that the car hasn't been looked after and that servicing has been neglected. Conversely, a sparkling clean engine could have been steam-cleaned to disguise problems.
- Check the oil level and colour before you start the engine. If it's low, or sludgy or dirty, check when it was last changed with the service schedule to ensure the car hasn't been neglected. Also check for beige 'mayonnaise' on the oil filler neck or cap and on the oil breather pipe (which goes from the air filter to the oil filler pipe), a sign of head gasket leakage.
- The coolant should be the colour of anti-freeze, not rust-coloured. An engine that has been run without anti-freeze may have problems.
- Check no oil is leaking from the engine.
- When you start the engine, the oil light should go out soon after it starts. There shouldn't be any rattles or knocking noises, even from cold.
- Rev the engine briefly from idle. Check for blue or black smoke at the back. Both indicate problems.
- Watch for signs of overheating on the temperature gauges.

Transmission

- The clutch should operate smoothly and all the gears should engage easily.
- If the gearchange stiffens at higher revs, the clutch may be worn. Check for clutch slip by driving the car up a hill in top gear.
- On the test drive, change down into each gear from a higher speed than normal to test the synchromesh. If the gears baulk or crunch, or if the gearbox whines, the car may need a new gearbox.

Tyres

- Check the treads and sidewalls on all tyres - including the spare. Anything less than 1.6mm of tread is illegal in the UK, but ideally each should have much more than this. The sidewalls should have no signs of damage or any bulges. Uneven wear suggests steering, tracking or suspension problems.

Suspension

- Push down at the corners and let go. The car should rebound once just past the level position, then go back to normal if the shock absorbers are working.
- If the suspension knocks on bumpy roads or the handling feels imprecise, it indicates worn bushes, joints and shock absorbers.
- Check for fluid leakage from the shock absorbers (look inside the wheelarch at the cylinder inside the coil spring). Any fluid on the outside is a warning sign they are on the way out, so get them checked out. If they groan, walk away.

Steering

- Vague steering can just be a sign of low or high tyre pressures, so check them.
- Turn the steering wheel gently while a friend watches the front wheels – there shouldn't be any delay in the turn and the wheels moving. There shouldn't be any free play – and the car will fail an MoT if there is.
- Unbalanced wheels lead to a wobbly steering wheel.

Brakes

- The brake pedal should feel solid and never sink to the floor before working.
- You can check a brake servo is working easily – pump the pedal several times, then hold the pedal down and start the engine. The pedal will go down as the engine starts.
- A car should never veer when the brakes are applied hard – even suddenly from high speed. Seized or leaking wheel cylinders or calipers are usually to blame.
- A car juddering under braking is suffering from distorted front brake discs.
- Check the brake hoses under the wheelarches for swelling or leaks.

Before you buy

- If it's over three years old, check the car has a current MoT certificate.
- Ask to see the full service history, as well as receipts for any work. Compare details such as odometer readings when work was done with the current reading.
- If the vendor is not the person on the registration document, you should get written confirmation from the owner that the vendor may sell the car on his behalf.
- Don't leave without the V5C registration document – the car's yours, so this should be, too. Make sure you fill it out and post it back to the DVLA immediately.