

Used car inspection checklist

Seattle WA Mobile Mechanic | Free buyer worksheet | October 20, 2026

Vehicle / VIN: _____ Mileage: _____

Date / seller: _____ Engine cold on arrival? Y / N

Mark one: O = no concern noticed, C = concern, U = unchecked, N = not applicable. Blank = unchecked.

A completed sheet is not a safety certificate. Never open a hot coolant cap or get under an unsupported car.

Before the viewing: identity and history	O	C	U	N
Match the VIN in several places Compare the dashboard VIN, door label and documents. Stop and resolve any mismatch before paying.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Confirm seller authority and title status Compare seller identification with ownership documents; ask how any lien will be released. Record title brands and verify explanations.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Review maintenance evidence Ask for dated invoices with mileage. Compare scheduled work with the manufacturer maintenance schedule; a verbal claim is not a record.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Check recalls by VIN Use NHTSA and the manufacturer. Read any do-not-drive or park-outside instructions before arranging a test drive.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Compare mileage records Look for inconsistent mileage across invoices, history records and the odometer. Ask about gaps rather than guessing why they exist.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Agree on a cold start and independent inspection Ask the seller to leave the engine off before you arrive. Confirm permission for a test drive and a mechanic's inspection before a deposit.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parked walkaround: body, tires and leaks	O	C	U	N
View dry panels in daylight Compare paint, panel gaps, overspray and door operation. Rain can conceal surface flaws; ask to inspect again when dry.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Look for damage and corrosion From ground level, check visible sills, wheel arches and mounting areas. Do not crawl under a vehicle or rely on a jack.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inspect every tire Look across the tread for uneven wear, exposed cords, cracks and bulges. Record tire sizes; ask a mechanic about mismatches.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Record tread depth and tire pressure Use a tread gauge in several grooves. NHTSA says tires worn to 2/32 inch are unsafe; use the door-label cold pressure, not the sidewall maximum.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Check glass, lights and wipers Try low/high beams, signals, brake lights, washers and wipers with a helper. Look for windshield cracks and water entry.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Look at the parking spot Photograph fresh drips and their location before and after the drive. Clear A/C water can be normal; appearance alone cannot identify a fluid.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Observations / conditions / questions for the mechanic:				

Sources and full guide: seattlewamobilemechanic.com/tools/used-car-inspection-checklist/

FTC: consumer.ftc.gov/articles/buying-used-car-dealer | NHTSA: nhtsa.gov/recalls and [/vehicle-safety/tires](https://nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/tires)

Washington buying guidance: dol.wa.gov | Independent inspection: 206-350-0447

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Engine off and cool: under the hood	O	C	U	N
Follow the owner's manual for fluid checks If fitted, check oil using the specified procedure. Note low level, contamination or burnt smell without diagnosing from color alone.	☐	☐	☐	☐
View the coolant reservoir Check level only when cool and as the manual directs. Never remove a hot cooling-system cap.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inspect visible hoses and belts With the engine off, look for wet connections, cracks and fraying. Keep hands away from fans, which may start unexpectedly.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Look for fresh wetness and residue Note visible seepage, deposits and freshly cleaned areas. A clean engine bay does not establish that it is leak-free.	☐	☐	☐	☐
View the 12-volt battery Look for corrosion, loose mounting, swelling and damaged cables without touching terminals. A successful start is not a battery health test.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identify model-specific checks Ask about timing-belt history if fitted. EV/hybrid buyers need battery-health and charging checks; never touch orange high-voltage components.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cabin and first start	O	C	U	N
Check for moisture and unusual smells Inspect accessible carpet edges, cargo floor and spare-wheel well. Mustiness, stains or heavy fragrance warrant questions, not a flood diagnosis.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Try seats, belts and latches Check accessible belt webbing and buckles, seat adjustment, doors, windows and locks. Ask about missing keys.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Test ventilation and demisting Try heat, A/C and front/rear defrost where fitted. Weak demisting matters in Seattle rain; note conditions when testing cooling.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Observe the warning-light self-test Follow the manual's key-on sequence. Note lights that fail to illuminate or remain on, including engine, ABS and airbag warnings.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Observe the first start From a safe position, note extended cranking, rough idle, knocking or stalling. Record whether the engine was already warm on arrival.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Watch exhaust and instruments Note persistent smoke after warm-up, unusual smells and temperature warnings. Brief cold-weather vapor alone does not prove a fault.	☐	☐	☐	☐
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Test drive: only if safe and permitted	O	C	U	N
Confirm permission and safe conditions Agree on insurance and a lawful route. Do not drive with fuel leaks, damaged tires, brake concerns or a recall instruction prohibiting driving.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Check low-speed steering With both hands controlling the wheel, note clunks, binding or unusual effort. Never release the wheel to test tracking.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Check normal acceleration and shifting Note hesitation, flare in engine speed, harsh shifts or shudder. Use normal inputs; do not perform aggressive acceleration tests.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Check braking gently In safe traffic conditions, note pulling, grinding, vibration or a soft pedal. Stop the drive safely if braking feels unreliable.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Listen at appropriate road speeds On a safe legal route, note vibration, humming and wind/water leaks. Do not use a phone while driving; let a passenger take notes.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Recheck after parking Note new drips, smells, warning lights and hot restart behavior. Do not touch hot parts or open a hot coolant cap.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Before committing: resolve the unknowns	O	C	U	N
Write specific observations Record location, conditions and timing: for example, steering-wheel vibration during light braking. Avoid guessing the failed part.	☐	☐	☐	☐
List everything not checked A missed cold start, inaccessible underside or unavailable charging test remains unknown, even if everything else seemed fine.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Request a written independent report Ask for the VIN, findings, inspection limits and repair estimates. Clarify whether a lift, road test and diagnostic scan are included.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ask about diagnostic scan limits A code-free scan cannot rule out mechanical damage. Incomplete readiness monitors can have several causes; request follow-up instead of assuming fraud.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Separate immediate issues from later costs Discuss safety repairs, overdue maintenance and cosmetic work separately. Get vehicle-specific estimates before negotiating.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Resolve paperwork before payment Get promises in writing. For Washington private sales, review DOL guidance and consider meeting at a vehicle licensing office.	☐	☐	☐	☐

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