Used car buyer's checklist

Check the plate or VIN before you pay · United States · 2026

The VIN

- [ ] Ask the seller for the VIN (17 characters, no letters I, O or Q).
- [ ] Match the dashboard VIN (windshield corner) with the driver's door label.
- [ ] Also match it with the title, registration and insurance card.
- [ ] Scratched, covered or replaced label: walk away.

The lookup

- [ ] Run a plate or VIN lookup in an app.
- [ ] Read the free summary first: specs, open recalls and alerts.
- [ ] If you plan to buy, get the full vehicle history report.
- [ ] Check: accidents, odometer readings, number of owners, auctions, sales history.

Title brands

- [ ] Clean title: what you want to see.
- [ ] Salvage: declared a total loss by insurance.
- [ ] Rebuilt: was a total loss and got repaired.
- [ ] Flood: it was underwater.
- [ ] Lemon: bought back by the maker for a defect that couldn't be fixed.
- [ ] Odometer rollback: the mileage was changed.

Warning signs

- [ ] Musty smell or carpet that looks too new.
- [ ] Sand, dried mud or rust under the seats.
- [ ] Paint color that differs between body panels.
- [ ] Uneven gaps around doors, hood and trunk.
- [ ] Pedals and steering wheel too worn for the mileage.
- [ ] Warning light on with the engine running.

Test drive

- [ ] Start the engine cold.
- [ ] Brake hard in a safe spot: the car should not pull to one side.
- [ ] Listen for noises when turning and over bumps.
- [ ] Test A/C, heat, lights and windows.

Before you pay

- [ ] Pre-purchase inspection by a mechanic you trust.
- [ ] The name on the title matches the seller.
- [ ] No unpaid loan (lien) on the title.
- [ ] Pay in a way that leaves a record. Never wire money before seeing the car.
- [ ] Be careful with sellers in a hurry or who only take cash.

Independent guide. A lookup shows the car's history, not the owner's personal data. Webgatz is not affiliated with any app. webgatz.com