CarVerdict ✓

The 20-Minute Used-Car Checklist

Take a mechanic with you — even when you can't. Print this and bring it to every test drive.

1 Before you go (5 min at home)

- **Decode the VIN** (free at nhtsa.gov) — confirm year, make, model, engine match the listing.
- **Pull the history report** — look for accidents, title brands, odometer rollbacks, open recalls. Remember: unreported damage never shows up.
- **Price-check 5+ comparable listings** — same year, trim, mileage, within 200 miles. That's your fair range.
- **Google "*year make model* common problems"** — know the 2–3 failures to hunt for before you arrive.

2 Walk-around (5 min)

- ☐ Paint mismatch or orange-peel texture between panels = prior repair.
- ☐ Uneven panel gaps, misaligned bumpers/hood/trunk.
- ☐ Rust on rocker panels, wheel wells, under doors — poke it; flakes = structural.
- ☐ Tires: even wear, matching brands, DOT date under 6 years. Uneven wear = alignment/suspension.
- ☐ All glass intact; headlights/taillights clear, not fogged or cracked.
- ☐ Look underneath: fresh undercoating can hide rust; wet spots = active leaks.

3 Under the hood (3 min, engine OFF then ON)

- ☐ Oil: level between marks, honey-to-dark brown — **not** milky, **not** smelling of gas.
- ☐ Coolant: proper level, no oil film or rust color in the reservoir.
- ☐ Transmission fluid (if dipstick): pinkish-red, not brown or burnt-smelling.
- ☐ Belts: no cracking, fraying, or glazing. Hoses: firm, not mushy or swollen.
- ☐ Battery terminals clean; no swelling on the case.
- ☐ Cold start: no blue/white smoke, no knocking, no squealing.

4 Interior & electronics (2 min)

- ☐ Turn the key to ON (don't start): every warning light should illuminate, then all go OUT after starting. A light that never comes on = bulb removed to hide a problem.
- ☐ Test **every** button: windows, locks, mirrors, AC **and** heat, blower speeds, radio, wipers, lights, turn signals.
- ☐ Musty smell or damp carpets = water leak or flood history. Pull trunk carpet and check the spare-tire well.
- ☐ Seats, seatbelts retract; airbag covers intact, no warning lights.

5 The test drive (10 min — don't skip this)

- ☐ Brake from 40 mph: straight stop, no pulsing, no grinding, no pulling.
- ☐ Highway to 65+: no vibration in wheel/seat, tracks straight, no wandering.
- ☐ Transmission: smooth shifts, no slipping, no harsh clunks, no delay into Drive/Reverse.

- ☐ Full-lock turns in a parking lot: no clicking/popping (CV joints).
- ☐ Listen: no whining that changes with speed (bearings/diff), no ticking (lifters/exhaust).
- ☐ After the drive: recheck under the hood for fresh leaks or smells; glance at temp gauge — never above normal.

6 Paperwork (before money moves)

- ☐ VIN on dash matches VIN on door sticker matches VIN on the title. All 17 characters.
- ☐ Title is in the seller's name — no "title jumping," no open titles, no liens you didn't agree to.
- ☐ Ask for service records. Gaps aren't disqualifying, but they change the price.
- ☐ Never wire money or pay cash before seeing the car and the title in person.

Walk away immediately if…

- Frame/unibody rust or fresh undercoating hiding it
- Milky oil or white exhaust smoke (head gasket)
- Transmission slips, shudders, or bangs into gear
- Title doesn't match the seller, or the VIN doesn't match the car
- The seller rushes you, refuses an inspection, or won't let you test-drive
- Flood signs: silt in crevices, fogged gauges, musty trunk

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