

A Quick 20-Point Inspection

When Buying a Used Car

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If you're left on your own to do the inspection, don't worry! You don't have to be an expert to help your kid inspect the car, you just have to look for a few key things. You want to make sure the car hasn't been wrecked (or totaled!), and you want to make sure there are no obvious signs of a major problem in the near future.

What you'll need to inspect the car:

- A mirror
- A magnet
- A quarter
- A dollar bill
- A paper towel
- A small flashlight
- A USB/aux cord or CD

A quick 20-point inspection:

1. **Overview.** Start by looking over the outside for any dents, scratches, or paint touchups. Use your mirror to look at the underside of the vehicle. Paint overspray is a sure sign of a body repair. A quick look down the side of the car, in the light, will show every little dent and ding. Make sure all pieces (e.g. hood, bumpers, fenders, etc.) have the same texture; if they don't, this is a sign of a paint job on all or part of the vehicle.
2. **Dollar Bill Trick.** Close each door (including the trunk/hatch) on a dollar bill. If you're unable to pull the dollar bill out, that's a good sign. If the dollar bill slips out of the closed door, that's a sign that the car has been wrecked, and something has been repaired or replaced.
3. **Rust Check.** Look for rust around and under the car. If one thing is rusted, it's likely there is a lot more rust elsewhere.
4. **Windshield.** Look closely at the windshield for any chips or cracks. Depending on your state, you may have to repair these before it will pass inspection. Also look for cracks that appear to show small splits that will turn into larger cracks.

5. **Wheels.** Check the wheels for any dents or bending. This is a sign that the driver either hit a curb or a large pothole. It's not a dealbreaker, but you'll want to know if you have to replace the wheels, down the road (again, no pun intended).
6. **Tires.** Check the tires for heavy wear or damage. Replacing tires is required maintenance, but if you'll need to replace them immediately, factor that into the price. You can use a quarter to check the tread. If you hold the coin upright, the tread should at least go to the bottom of Washington's head.
7. **Magnet Trick.** Use your magnet (ask permission first) to check for rust and filled areas. If the magnet doesn't stick to the metal parts of the car, that's a sign of a repair.
8. **Engine Noise Check.** Start the engine—preferably from a cold start—to listen for any unusual sounds. If there is any smoke, idle problems, or rattling, it may be best to avoid the car.
9. **Fluid Check.** It's time to look under the hood. Check the oil. If there isn't enough right now, the car has likely ran with low oil, which is terrible for the engine. Make sure the oil is a golden color, not solid black (black oil is another sign that the oil hasn't been changed in a while). Smell the oil. A burnt smell is a bad sign. The same goes for antifreeze.
10. **Flashlight Test.** Use your flashlight to check for leaks, filth, and anything else that shows the car hasn't been properly taken care of. Check the battery and the terminals for corrosion. If the battery looks really old, a new one is something else to factor into the cost.
11. **Smell Check.** Now hop back into the car. Check the interior for signs of smoking or pets. The smell is usually a dead giveaway. You can also look for stains, ash, and cigarette burns.
12. **Lights.** Check the headlights, brake lights, tail lights, and all blinkers for proper function.
13. **Horn Test.** Check the horn for proper function.
14. **Seatbelt.** Inspect the seatbelts and make sure all work properly.
15. **Heat & Air.** Make sure the heat and air conditioning work. It's common to only think about checking heat *or* air, based on the time of year. Check both. And don't forget to check the defrost. In our family's history of cars, we've had to replace more than one blend door actuators. This is a *huge* problem in the winter time. So don't forget to check the heat, even in the summer time.
16. **Windows & Locks.** Check that all windows roll up and down, and all doors lock and unlock.
17. **Sound System.** Make sure the stereo works properly. Use your USB/aux cord or CD to test it. Turn the volume up a little to check for any blown speakers.
18. **Spare Tire.** Check for a spare tire and jack. Make sure all pieces are present for the jack.
19. **Key Fobs.** Test the key fob(s), if it comes with any, to make sure they work correctly.
20. **Driving Test.** Now it's time to drive the car. Listen for any strange sounds. Briefly let the steering wheel go to see if the car blatantly veers to one side or the other (a sign that an alignment is needed). Make sure the car shifts properly, if it's an automatic. A transmission is an *enormous* expense. If it's a manual transmission, make sure *all* gears work properly (including reverse!). You'd be surprised how many cars are missing an entire gear — a guy I used to work with didn't have first gear!