

The Lemon-Free Used Car Checklist

8 red flags every Australian used car buyer should check before they hand over a single dollar.

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HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST

Print it, take it to every inspection, and tick a box only after you have verified the item with your own eyes (not the seller's). If more than one item in any section gives you doubt, get an independent pre-purchase inspection or walk away.

RED FLAG 1

The Price is Too Good to Be True

Genuine bargains sit near market price with clean paperwork. Cars priced miles below have a story.

- I've compared the asking price against five or more similar listings on Carsales, Drive and Facebook Marketplace
- The asking price is within 15 percent of the average for that make, model, year and kilometres
- If it's lower, the seller has a credible explanation (and proof)
- I'm not being rushed with "pay today or it's gone" pressure
- The seller will hold the car while I arrange an independent inspection

RED FLAG 2

A Sketchy Vehicle History

Logbooks lie. Databases don't. Cross-check everything before you fall in love with a car.

- PPSR check shows no security interest, no write-off and no theft record
- Logbook stamps go up in chronological order with no skipped years
- Service history matches the kilometres on the dash
- The make's nearest dealer can verify the VIN's service records on file
- Registration history is continuous (no long unexplained gaps)

RED FLAG 3

Mechanical Issues You Can Hear, See or Feel

A warm engine hides almost every problem worth finding. Inspect cold, drive at every speed.

- I inspected the engine fully cold (not warmed up by the seller)
- No ticking lifters, rattling timing chain or piston slap on first start
- No coolant smell (sweet), oil burn (acidic) or fuel smell at idle
- I drove the car at highway speeds, not just around the block
- Heavy braking did not pull, shudder or grind
- I have booked or completed an independent pre-purchase inspection (RACQ or mobile mechanic, around \$250 to \$400)

RED FLAG 4

Suspicious Paintwork or Patch-Up Repairs

A small bumper repair is fine. Major structural work is not. Learn to spot the difference.

- Sighted down each panel: paint is the same shade in direct sunlight
- No overspray on door rubbers, window trims or inside the engine bay
- Panel gaps are even from one side of the car to the other
- Magnet test passes on steel panels (sticks to clean metal, slides off filler)
- Spot welds inside the door jambs are uniform (factory pattern, not patchy)
- Floor pans and chassis rails show no major repair welds under the carpet

RED FLAG 5

Signs of Odometer Tampering

Wear and kilometres should tell the same story. When they don't, the dial has been wound back.

- Steering wheel, seat, pedal rubbers and gear knob match the kilometres claimed
- Logbook stamps show kilometres going up in chronological order
- Three sources match: dash odometer, logbook, manufacturer database
- No signs the digital cluster has been re-flashed or replaced

RED FLAG 6

Electrical Gremlins That Won't Quit

Mechanical faults have a source. Electrical ones can take a workshop a week to find.

- Every dash warning light illuminated briefly on cold start (nothing missing)
- An OBD2 scan shows no recurring fault codes after a clear and short drive
- Every electric window worked from both master and door switches
- All locks, boot release, fuel flap, cruise, A/C (cold and hot), heated seats and stereo work
- Bluetooth, reversing camera and infotainment all function normally

RED FLAG 7

Shady Sellers and Dodgy Dealers

A curbsider is an unlicensed trader pretending to be a private seller. Their cars come with no consumer protection.

- The seller is happy to meet at their home address, not just a public car park
- Photo ID was shown and the name matches the registration papers
- The seller's phone number is not linked to multiple cars on Carsales or Marketplace under different names
- The seller will allow an independent pre-purchase inspection
- If the seller calls themselves a "dealer", I have verified their licence on the QLD Office of Fair Trading register

RED FLAG 8

A Missing, Mismatched or Stolen VIN

Even one different digit means the car has been "rebirthed" from two different cars. One was probably stolen.

- Windscreen plate VIN matches the VIN on the door jamb sticker
- Stamped chassis or firewall VIN matches the windscreen plate
- Hidden VINs (boot floor, under the rear seat) all match
- I have photographed every VIN location for my own records
- PPSR and the QLD Written-Off Vehicle Register both verify the VIN
- I have checked the manufacturer's recall database for outstanding recalls

Before you transfer a single dollar

The last five checks every Queensland used car buyer should make on inspection day, regardless of how much you trust the seller.

- I have a written contract or signed receipt naming the seller, the buyer, the car (VIN, rego, make, model), the price and the date
- The transfer of registration paperwork is signed and ready to lodge with TMR
- I have a current safety certificate (where required) dated within the last two months
- I have arranged comprehensive insurance starting the moment I take possession
- Payment is going via bank transfer, not handed over in person

Already stuck with a lemon?

If you've ended up with a car that's draining your wallet faster than it's getting you to work, we can help. Sell Any Car Fast buys cars in any condition across South East Queensland. Same-day inspection, same-day bank transfer, no obligation, no pressure.

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SERVICE AREA

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