

Check it out!

When looking over a used car, systematically check out the obvious things first. Is the body rusted? (look underneath); do all the lights work? (try them); are the tires O.K.? Horn works? Body rust usually starts in the quarter and rocker panels, as we learned from Bill Gilbert at Gilbert Motors in Mount Joy, so look at them.

Check the steering wheel. If you can move it more than an inch or two without the front wheels starting to move, the steering box is worn, and soon to be junk.

If the pedals are badly worn, and the driver's seat is squashed flat, the car has been driven hard.

Fresh oil spots under the car indicate leaks. If the

engine has a bad leak, you will see the clean streak where oil washed the dirt down the side of it.

If you don't mind dirty hands, grab the front wheel at the top and try to shake it in and out. Much play means that the front end needs work. Do this on both sides.

If the dealer has not changed the oil since he got the used car, pull out the dipstick and feel the oil between your fingers. If it's very black and gritty, chances are the car has not been serviced regularly. Smell the automatic transmission fluid also: if it's dark and smells burned, the transmission is not in good shape.

An engine can run roughly and not be in bad mechanical condition—it may only be in need of a tune-up. It's a good idea to take the car to your mechanic for a check-up before you buy it. If the dealer won't allow this, don't buy it.

You may want to run some tests yourself, before spending money on a professional check-up. Here's the most important one:

Before you go to the lot, buy a compression gauge for about ten dollars, and take a spark plug wrench along. Take all the plugs out of the engine and test the compression on each cylinder by cranking the engine with the gauge in each of the holes. Write down the readings as you go. If one or more of the cylinders reads more than five pounds different from

the others, the engine has problems. There are other tests you can do yourself, and books that tell you how.

Test-drive the car. Ed Crafts, of Modern Classics in Mount Joy, says that any reputable dealer will allow this. Listen for noises when you do, from the engine and rear end. Drive with the window open so you can hear.

When you get back, pull the dipstick and look for bubbles or water in the oil, which could indicate a cracked block, and the imminent demise of the engine. Look for dripping oil underneath again.

Note: a brand-new paint job on an old car might be hiding a rotten body, according to Ed Crafts. The same idea applies to a newly-steam-cleaned engine.

The funny little dial with all those big numbers

Some suspicious types worry that the odometer reading (the total elapsed mileage indicator in the speedometer housing) might have been tampered with. It's possible that the individual who sold the car to the dealer did, but the dealer would never do such a thing. Even if he was dishonest, he'd be crazy to alter the setting: Federal law has very stiff penalties for that.

If you think the reading is low, look at the windshield in direct sunlight. Tiny pits will mar the

polish if the car has more than 70 or 80 thousand miles on it.

Odometer readings can generally be depended on with PA cars. Those from out of state are more suspect.

High mileage doesn't mean the car is no good. A car that's been well maintained and has gone far is a better bet than one that wasn't kept up and driven less. The odometer won't tell you how often the oil was changed or if the auto was warmed up on cold mornings.

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