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When buying a used car, it's important to thoroughly check it first for signs of damage that may not be obvious at first glance. This guide covers some of the basics so that you can have confidence in your purchase.

It's important to check the legality of the car and the seller. In Canada, it is legal to buy from either a used car dealer or a private seller. However, if it's a dealer you're buying from, make sure he or she is licensed to sell used cars by the appropriate authority in your province. Make sure that no one else has claims on the car by checking its serial number with the Personal Property Registry or one of the many Driver Service Centers.

Don't be afraid to ask the seller if you can have the vehicle checked out by your mechanic- this is standard practice. A mechanic can exam the vehicle and give you a good idea about any recurring problems and how well it has been cared for. They can also check the mileage with them to ensure the seller hasn't wound back the milometer in an attempt to get a better price. After locating the car's VIN number, you can also request a vehicle history report from various companies located across Canada or specific to your province (i.e. CarProof or the ICBC for those in British Columbia, etc).

Look over the bodywork of the car for rust – the window frames, wheel arches and bumpers are the most common places it occurs. If the paintwork looks bubbled, that's a bad sign. Open and close the doors and boot to see if they work smoothly, and do the same with the roof for convertibles.

Problems with the suspension of the car can be identified by pushing down on one corner. It should rise smoothly again rather than bouncing up and down. Uneven wear on the tires is another sign that the suspension may need adjusting.

A re-spray may indicate the vehicle has had significant damage or is stolen. Check the paintwork on the car is all the same colour and look at the rubber seals on the doors – paint marks here may indicate a re-spray.

Look over the windshield for any small cracks. These can easily spread and the car may require immediate windshield repair.

Even if you're not an expert mechanic, there are things under the bonnet that are easy to inspect. Remove the oil stick, wipe it, and dip it back in to check the oil – it should be at the marked level and a clean golden colour. Look under the oil cap for signs of a gooey white liquid – this suggests a broken head gasket and significant engine damage. The battery connectors should also be free of rust.

By making these simple investigations before buying a used car, in the long run you'll save yourself a lot of trouble and expense.

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