



Make the Most of Your Test-Drive

Once you've narrowed your vehicle choices you're ready for one of the most important aspects of buying a car—the test-drive.

When it comes to car shopping, you can look at Internet pictures, read reviews, and check out

models that interest you at auto shows. But, until you get a test-drive, you can't be sure if that particular car or truck is one you could live with happily for several years.

To get the most from your drive, plan ahead. Count on getting at least 20 minutes in the car and insist on a drive with varied conditions: freeway driving, stop-and-go city or suburban streets, and rough pavement or railroad tracks. Make a list of things you want to check so it's easy to keep track of them during the drive.

When you get to the dealership, make it clear that you won't be talking about buying today. "Tell the salesperson you are there only for a test-drive and product information," advises Linda Goldberg of CarQ.com. Rules call for showing your driver's license and, often, proof that you have auto insurance. But don't give out

information about your job or income. If your license or insurance card has your Social Security number on it, make a copy and black the number out. You don't want the dealer to check your credit at this point—having too many credit inquiries can hurt your credit rating, and you want to keep your options open.

With the paperwork done, here's what to look for before and during your drive:

1. Check size and seating. While still on the dealer's lot, look at whether this vehicle will work for the people you drive and things you haul regularly. Get in and out of the backseat to see how hard or easy it is. Look at the car's trunk or the cargo space in an SUV or van. Will it carry the luggage, groceries, or other supplies you need? Is the rear opening low enough for easy lifting into the vehicle? In a van or SUV, how easily do rear seats fold down for more hauling space?

Sit in the driver's seat and adjust it. Does the view out the windshield and overall visibility seem good? Reach for the radio, heating, and air conditioning controls. Do they seem easy to reach and simple to adjust without looking away from the road too long? Turn on

the radio briefly. Does the sound quality suit you?

2. Concentrate on road feel. Try to include at least two freeway ramps to make sure the car is powerful enough to merge easily, and then to pass other vehicles without straining. With the radio off, pay attention to how smoothly the automatic shift changes gears. Is it jerky, or does it seem to shift too soon? Pull off the freeway and check lower-speed driving on streets with stoplights. Take a couple of corners sharply. Does the vehicle handle the cornering without leaning or swaying too much? This can be an important quality in emergency situations.

Find a street with little traffic or a big parking lot and test the brakes—your most important safety equipment. Hit the brakes hard from about 50 mph. Do you get a fast, smooth, controlled stop without pulling to the left or right?

3. Check out comfort. You want a vehicle that not only drives well, but also rides smoothly. Does the ride on the freeway feel good enough to be comfortable for long vacation drives? Is the car quiet? With the radio off, do you hear rattles or other noise? Is the wind noise at freeway speeds bothersome? Turn on the heater or air conditioner. Does the fan noise seem reasonable? Are the air vents easy to adjust and do they seem comfortable? After you pull off the highway, how does the vehicle feel going over rough pavement or railroad tracks?

4. Wind up politely but firmly. When you get back to the dealership, ask the salesperson any questions you have and take a business card and any literature about the car. When you get back to your own car, quickly write down your impressions in a notebook or checklist. Now you have a clear basis for comparison with the other cars on your short list.

5. Adapt your routine for used cars. If you're looking at used cars instead of new, check for the same things as with a new car under similar driving conditions. But here, watching for mechanical trouble or other faults becomes much more important.

Whether shopping with an individual

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seller or a dealership used-car department, take a look at the tires to check for cracks or bald spots. A car with poor tires isn't safe. Look for worn brake pedals. If a three-year-old car with supposedly 30,000 miles on it has wear on the pedals, be suspicious of the mileage. Does the engine start readily and idle smoothly? When driving, pay special attention to the transmission and brakes. Does there seem to be slipping or hesitation during automatic shifts? Do the brakes pull to either side during stopping, or make noise during hard stops? Best of all, if you're buying from an individual seller with no warranty, pay to have a mechanic of your choice check out the car. (See "Catch the Benefits of Buying a Used Vehicle," p. 21.)

When you've finished your test-drives, sit down with your notes and checklists and decide which car really suits you. Then you're ready to check out pricing sites like *Edmunds.com* and Kelley Blue Book (*kbb.com*) for reasonable target prices so you can go back and negotiate the best possible price on that car, truck, or van.