Key points to consider when shopping for a pre-owned vehicle in Indianapolis

Buying a used car can feel like a puzzle. You want a vehicle that runs well, fits your budget, and doesn't come with hidden problems. In Indianapolis, where the weather ranges from hot summers to icy winters, a car that has been through those seasons needs a closer look. A smart checklist helps you stay focused and avoid costly surprises.

Start with the paperwork before you even look at the car. Ask for the vehicle identification number (VIN) and run a history report through a trusted service. This report tells you if the car has been in a major accident, has a salvage title, or has outstanding liens. In Indiana, a car with a rebuilt title may have been seriously damaged and then repaired. Knowing this upfront saves time and helps you decide if the car is worth inspecting in person.

A good place to begin your search is a dealer that offers certified pre-owned vehicles with thorough inspections. For example, Ray Skillman Auto Group provides a range of used cars, trucks, SUVs, and vans in Indianapolis, and their certified pre-owned options come with a detailed check. This gives you a solid starting point, but even with a certified car, your own checklist matters.

Check the exterior and interior carefully

Walk around the car in good daylight. Look for mismatched paint, uneven gaps between panels, or rust along the edges of doors and wheel wells. These signs can point to past bodywork or exposure to road salt. In Indiana, salt is common on winter roads, so rust on the undercarriage is something to watch for. Open and close each door, the trunk, and the hood. They should feel solid and close evenly. If a door sags or sticks, the frame may have shifted.

Inside the cabin, test every switch and button. Turn on the lights, the windshield wipers, the turn signals, and the hazard lights. Check the air conditioning and heater by letting them run for a few minutes. A musty smell when the AC runs can mean a clogged drain or a mold problem in the system. Press the brake pedal and feel for a firm, consistent resistance. A spongy pedal suggests air in the brake lines or worn components. Also look at the seat belts. Pull them all the way out and make sure they retract smoothly. A belt that sticks or frays is a safety issue.



Look under the hood and under the car

With the engine off and cool, remove the oil cap and look inside. Clean oil should appear amber and free of metal shavings. A dark, sludgy coating on the cap can mean infrequent oil changes. Check the dipstick for the same. The coolant reservoir should have fluid at the marked line and look clear or lightly colored. Rusty or oily coolant hints at internal leaks. Pull the dipstick for the transmission fluid if the car has an accessible one. The fluid should be reddish and smell like oil, not burnt. On the ground, look for fresh spots under the engine, transmission, and around the wheel hubs. A small drip can become a large problem later.

Take a flashlight and inspect the rubber boots on the steering and suspension joints. Cracked or torn boots let dirt in and shorten the life of the joint. The tires should have even wear across the tread. If the inside or outside edge is worn more than the center, the alignment may be off. Check the tire age by looking at the four-digit code on the sidewall. The first two digits are the week, the last two are the year. Tires older than six years should raise a question about safety, even if the tread looks deep.

Take it for a real test drive

A short drive around the block is not enough. Plan a route that includes a stop-and-go street, a smooth road at 45 to 55 miles per hour, and a turn into a parking lot where you can do a figure-eight at low speed. Listen for clicks when you turn the steering wheel all the way. A constant clicking may mean a worn joint. On the straight road, let go of the wheel briefly. If the car drifts

to one side, the alignment or tire pressure is off. Accelerate from a stop and feel for a hesitation or a lurch. That could point to a problem with the fuel system or transmission.

Apply the brakes firmly from about 40 miles per hour. The car should stop straight without pulling. A vibration in the brake pedal or a squealing sound often means the brake pads or rotors are near the end of their life. Drive over a few bumps or a rough patch. Listen for rattles or thumps from the suspension. A well-maintained car should feel tight, not loose.

Check the electronics and comfort features

Turn on the radio and adjust the volume. Test all the speakers for clarity and balance. In many used cars, the infotainment system is a common failure point. If the screen is dim or unresponsive, the repair can be expensive. Roll down each window and roll it back up. They should move smoothly and seal tightly when closed. Check the power seat adjustments if the car has them. A stuck seat motor is a nuisance but can be fixed. Also test the rear defroster and the heated mirrors if the car has them. In Indiana winters, these features help keep the car safe and comfortable.

Review the vehicle history and inspection records

Ask for a copy of any inspection report the dealer or seller has done. A thorough inspection covers the engine, transmission, brakes, tires, lights, and fluids. If the seller offers a warranty, read what it covers. Many used cars come with a limited warranty that covers major mechanical failures for a short period. Understand what is excluded, such as wear items like belts and hoses. If you are buying from a private seller, ask for service records. A car with a thick file of receipts shows a pattern of care. A car with none may have been neglected.



When you shop at a dealer that certifies its pre-owned vehicles, you get an extra layer of confidence. Ray Skillman Auto Group, for instance, puts each certified car through a detailed process before it goes on the lot. That means the car has already been checked for common problems, so you can focus on the things that matter most to you, like the color, the features, and the price.

Trust your instincts and your notes

After you finish your checklist, take a few minutes to sit in the car and think. Does it feel right? Is the seat comfortable? Can you reach the pedals and the steering wheel easily? A car that looks perfect on paper but feels cramped or awkward will not make you happy in the long run. Write down your impressions and compare them with other cars you have test-driven. A clear head and a simple list help you make a smart decision that you will feel good about later.