What markings and features should a compliant number plate include?

What makes a number plate legal in the UK?

A number plate that meets UK road rules must show certain markings and be made to a specific standard. The plate itself is more than just a set of letters and numbers - it is a regulated item that police and MOT testers check for compliance. If you are buying new plates or replacing old ones, knowing what to look for helps you avoid fines and keep your vehicle legal.

The rules are set by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and the British Standard for number plates. A plate that follows these rules is called a DVLA compliant plate. Below we break down each feature that a legal plate must have.

The reflective background

Every number plate in the UK must have a reflective background. For the front of a vehicle, the background must be white. For the rear, it must be yellow. The reflection helps other road users see the plate in low light and at night. The reflective material itself must meet the British Standard (BS AU 145e or later). If the plate is faded, damaged or has a non-standard colour, it fails the requirement and the vehicle is not road legal.



Character font and size

The characters on a number plate must be in a specific font called the Charles Wright font. This font was designed to be clear and easy to read at a distance. No other font, style or script is allowed. The characters must also be a certain height: 79 millimetres for standard plates, with a stroke width of 14 millimetres. The space between characters must be exactly 11 millimetres, and the space between the age identifier and the random letters must be 33 millimetres. These measurements are not optional - they are part of the design that makes plates readable by cameras and by the human eye.

Spacing rules

The spacing of characters on a number plate follows a strict pattern. For a standard UK plate, the format is two letters, then two numbers, then a space, then three letters. For example, AB12 CDE. The space in the middle is mandatory. Squeezing characters together or adding extra spaces is not allowed. Mis-spaced plates are a common reason for MOT failure and can lead to a fine. The spacing rules also apply to plates for older vehicles that use a different format - the pattern must still match the vehicle's registration document.

The manufacturer mark and British Standard mark

Every legal number plate must show a manufacturer mark and a British Standard mark. The manufacturer mark is usually a small logo or text at the bottom centre of the plate that identifies who made it. The British Standard mark is the letters "BS AU 145e" (or the current version) printed on the plate. These marks prove that the plate was made to the required standard. Without them, the plate is not legal. You can check these marks when you receive a new plate - if they are missing, the plate is not DVLA compliant.

Plate visibility and secure fixings

The plate must be clearly visible at all times. That means it cannot be obscured by dirt, damage, a tow bar, a bike rack or any accessory. The plate must also be securely fixed to the vehicle. Loose plates or plates held on with tape can fall off or move, making them hard to read. The fixings themselves must not cover any part of the characters or the border. Some plates come with pre-drilled holes; others use adhesive pads. Either method is fine as long as the plate stays firmly in place and the characters remain fully visible.



No non-standard features

Certain features are banned on UK number plates. You cannot add a background pattern, a flag other than the official ones (Union Jack, Cross of St George, Cross of St Andrew, or Red Dragon of Wales), or any sticker that obscures the characters. You also cannot use a 3D effect that

changes the shape of the letters or makes them look different from the standard font. Some drivers try to use screws with coloured caps or decorative borders - these are not allowed if they interfere with readability. The rule is simple: the plate must be easy to read from 20 metres away, day or night.

How plates are checked during a vehicle inspection

During an MOT test, the inspector checks the number plate for all the features above. They look at the reflective background, the font, the spacing, the manufacturer mark and the British Standard mark. They also check that the plate is not damaged, faded or obscured. If any part of the plate fails, the vehicle gets a fault. Police can also stop a vehicle and check the plates at any time. A non-compliant plate can result in a fine of up to £1,000 and the vehicle failing its MOT. For these reasons, it is worth making sure your plates are correct before you fit them.

What about personalised or custom plates?

Personalised number plates are popular, but they must still follow the same rules. The characters, spacing, background and markings all apply. You cannot change the font to something fancy or rearrange the letters to make a word if it breaks the spacing rules. The only difference is that the registration number itself is transferred to your vehicle - the plate must still be made to the same standard. If you buy a personalised plate from a private seller, check that it is genuine and that the plate itself is compliant. Some sellers supply plates that look correct but lack the required markings.

Understanding what makes a number plate legal is straightforward once you know the key points. The reflective background must be the right colour, the font must be Charles Wright, the spacing must follow the standard pattern, and the plate must carry the manufacturer mark and British Standard mark. These features are not just bureaucratic details - they ensure that legal number plates can be read by enforcement cameras and by other road users, keeping the system fair and effective. When you order new plates, always check that they meet these requirements. A plate that looks right but misses one of these features is not worth the risk. Whether you are replacing a damaged plate or buying a set for a new vehicle, the rules are the same. Stick to them and you will avoid problems at MOT time and on the road.



If you are unsure about a plate you already have, you can check it yourself. Look for the British Standard mark and the manufacturer mark. Measure the character height and spacing if you

want to be thorough. Check that the reflective background is not scratched or faded. If anything is wrong, replace the plate with one that is correctly made. It is a simple fix that saves you from a fine and keeps your vehicle compliant. Remember, the purpose of these rules is to make every plate on the road clear and consistent. That benefits everyone - drivers, pedestrians and enforcement agencies alike. So next time you look at your number plate, you will know exactly what to look for and why each feature matters.