

How to Buy a Used Car

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When I wanted to buy a used car as a grad student, I asked a lot of questions from my experienced friends, and learned a lot. I decided to share them with others. However, I should emphasize that this document contains my points of view and preferences, and many might disagree with me. I bought a used car in January of 2010, in Atlanta, Georgia.

1. Where to look for used cars

I tried many websites, but I found the craigslist the best for searching for a used car. You don't want to buy a car from dealers, because of different reasons:

1. The private owner (craigslist) sells the car between one to two thousand dollars cheaper than a dealer.
2. The private owner (if she/he is really the owner and not a dealer who is pretending to be the owner), will not hide the problems from you. I mean they might try to, but if the car has leakages, they won't usually clean it and you will see it. While the dealers, show you a perfect car, that has no problem when you look at it, but it might put you in trouble in a month after buying it.

2. What cars to look for

After looking into adds for a while, you will realize which ones are the ones you want to pursue and call the owner. I learned different factors that played a role in my decisions:

1. No salvage title. Well it is obvious. The car might be super cheap, but you will have a hard time selling it. It will probably have a lot of problems.
2. No auction. Many people find it advantageous to buy cars that are sold in auction, since they tend to be much cheaper. Apparently cars sold at auctions can turn out to be good cars sometimes. However, the question is what cars typically are sold in auctions? a) the cars that a company or a person leased for 5 years, then

returned it to the bank, and the bank sold it in auction. Since the owner knew she/he is going to have the car only for a few years, they probably didn't care about the car much, didn't change the oil in time, and put a lot of milage on it. b) the second category is when a person gets a loan from the bank, and is not able to pay the bills. So the bank takes the car and sells it in auction. This is probably the good case. I don't feel good to drive that car (just feeling sympathy with the previous owner), but these are the rare cases in which the auction cars are good.

3. There are some people who claim that they are owners, but indeed they have bought the car two weeks ago and are trying to sell it and make some profit. They are usually mechanics, and the point I mentioned about the dealers, usually is true about them too. They usually do not tell you what is wrong with the car. I also know friends who bought a car, and the owner had changed the milage to sell the car more expensive. After they bought the car, they realized the true milage is way higher.
4. Go talk to the owner. You probably can guess if he is honest or not. I personally found Americans more honest. Also each city has some good and bad locations. Try to buy the car from the good locations, where people are richer. Those ones probably just want to sell the car because they want to buy a new one.
5. There are typical stories that some owners will tell you. "This car is my brother's and I am selling it for him". "We just got a kid now, and we need to buy a SUV". "My wife is going to a different city and I am selling her car". When you hear these sentences, the guy is not a real private owner with a high probability. I gradually invented a trick to discriminate between the real owners and dealers. I would call the person and say, I am calling for your add in the craigslist. The ones which were dealers would ask "which one are you talking about?", but the real owner would start talking about

her car. Again let me mention that, many people find it OK to buy the car from dealers, I was just so picky.

6. Check all the records in the CARFAX. Take the car to a mechanic. In the next section I will describe what questions you can ask from the person on the phone about the mechanical problems that the car might have. These questions affect the price, as well as might affect your decision whether you want to buy the car or not.

3. Questions about mechanical problems

My friend Farbod Shokrieh gave me a great list of what to ask about mechanical problems a car might have. You want to ask these questions on the phone, and see if you want to spend an hour driving to go and see the car. Here is the list:

1. Do you have all the service record?
2. Does it pass the emission test?
3. Any accident that is not reported?
4. Any mechanical/cosmetic problems?
5. Engine changed?

The mentioned questions are very critical and really important in decision making. More detailed questions are listed next:

1. Any leaks?
2. A/C and heat works?
3. Windows and locks work?
4. Radio works?
5. Is the timing belt changed?
6. Is the water pump and thermostat changed?
7. Poly V (water pump) belt
8. Suspension condition (control arms, bushing, ...)?
9. Tires condition ($> \frac{3}{4}$ inch)
10. Brake pads and rotors
11. Fluids and filters are changed? (esp brake fluids and gas filter)
12. Spark plugs and cables