Vehicle Test Drive Checklist

Test drives aren't just about kicking the tires, or even taking a car for a spin around the block. The right choice includes a thorough inspection—the car you buy must fit your needs, lifestyle and demands. Make sure you're prepared when you get behind the wheel of a new or used car with this comprehensive guide to vehicle test drives.

The Basics
- Date/Time:
- Make/Model:
- Dealership/Salesperson:
- Vehicle Identification Number (VIN):
- Odometer Reading:
- Color (Interior):
- Color (Exterior):
- Equipment (Standard and Optional): *If possible, get a copy of the sticker*
- Engine, number of Cylinders:
- Transmission (Standard or Automatic):
- Drive (Front Wheel, All Wheel, etc.):

Before You Drive
The Walkaround is a very important part of the test drive, and you're not even inside the car. Let's face it: except for the gearheads and racers, we pretty much buy a car on looks and comfort. Does it say what I want to say to the world, within my budget and credit rating? Making sure it's a look you'll love for at least three years is all part of the test drive, so buckle up and let's take a walk:

The Walkaround
- What does the styling say?
- Is the color appealing?
- What other cars does it remind you of?
- Are there any blemishes, fades or other defects?
- Are the doors, trunk, and hood easy to operate?
- Are the doors heavy? Do they sound tight?
- Tires and wheels: standard or optional?
- Are the windows UV-protected?
- Dealer-installed options?
- Special features?

Pop the Hood
- Does the hood stay open easily?
- Are the important things easy to find and check? (Oil, transmission fluid, coolant, radiator cap, windshield washer fluid, power steering fluid.)
- Is there a light under the hood?
- Can you check the battery easily? Jump it easily?
- Does the engine and transmission match what you wanted to test drive?

Luggage in the Trunk
- Is there enough space?
• Is the space usable?
• Is it well-lighted?
• Spare & jack location?
• Is it easy to put things in the trunk? Retrieve?
• Does the trunk stay open?
• Can you open the trunk from the inside?

**What's on the Inside**
• Interior (cloth, leather, vinyl)?
• Fabric color?
• Other interior colors?
• Does the color scheme appeal to you?
• Does the vehicle fit your needs for "roominess?" (Leg and head room front and rear?)
• Is the back seat roomy?
• Seat fit and functionality?
• Seats adjustment range? Workability of adjustments? (Headrests, armrests, seatbelts.)
• Do you feel comfortable sitting in the vehicle?

**The Drive**
Okay, now for the fun part. Grab the keys, get in and tell the salesman to buckle up. But don't test how much air you can get out of the dealership parking lot. Instead, focus on real world situations. Drive in traffic? Get it in a jam. Freeway driver? Get out there and test it on lane changes, sudden braking and acceleration. Most dealerships will have a test drive route that includes main types of driving situations, so it's not too hard to give the car a decent test. You may not be able to go on a road trip, but 15-20 minutes is a reasonable request.

**Initial Impressions**
• Does it have the power you need?
• Does the vehicle feel right across all speeds?
• Does it struggle up hill?
• Does it "rebel" in traffic?
• Noises?

**Safety Systems & Braking**
This is the most important part of a car. Fortunately, more and more safety features are coming standard these days. Be sure to check what's standard (side air bags?) or optional.

• How many air bags?
• Up-to-date child restraint system?
• Does the brake pedal movement smooth and even?
• Is the vehicle equipped with ABS (Anti-Lock Braking Systems)?
• Does the vehicle have traction control?
• Noises?
• Shimmy on brake?

**Steering and Handling**
• When you turn left, how long does it take the vehicle to actually move? The correct answer should be immediately, but you never know...
• Does the vehicle respond to steering wheel movement?
• U-Turn factor: Will you have to execute a three-point turn in the middle of an intersection?
• How does acceleration and braking affect steering? (Some front wheel drive vehicles have serious torque steer.)
• Noises?
• Does the vehicle feel "comfortable and correct" regardless of turning right or left?
• Does the car drift easily?

Ride Comfort
• Waterbed, Mattress, or horse? Is the ride comfortable?
• Does the vehicle bounce over bumps or smooth them out?
• Does the vehicle have special ride adjustment features?
• When changing gears, speeds, or braking does the vehicle bounce?

Noise Levels
For most people, external noise is an unwanted passenger. Some cars are tuned so that you hear the exhaust when you accelerate (generally as a sweet reminder of why you paid for the larger engine), but for most people a quiet ride is ideal.

• Start with the fan off, vents shut, radio off and windows closed.
• Can you hear the engine when it's idling? On acceleration?
• Can you hear road and tire noise? How loud?
• Wind noise with windows up-do you have to yell?
• Does anything sound loose or ill-fitting?

Overall Drivability and Comfort
• Is it easy to drive?
• Will you still be able to feel your legs after a three-hour cruise?
• Can you see well in all directions?
• Does the vehicle have the creature comforts that you want?

Overall
Okay, put it all together and answer these questions:
• What will people say when they see you in this car?
• Trade offs? What do you hate the most about this car?
• Must-haves? What do you love most?
• Future problems? Often, a car's weaknesses don't come out until around 30,000 miles. What do you think it'll be?