



California Used Car Buyer's Paperwork Checklist

Use this checklist to prepare for buying a used vehicle from a private seller in California. Confirm the latest requirements with the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) before completing your transaction.

QUICK ANSWER

When buying a used car privately in California, ensure the seller provides a valid smog certificate (required for most 1976+ vehicles over 4 years old) and a properly signed title with odometer disclosure completed. Submit the signed title and fees to a CA DMV office within 10 days of purchase. California use tax is collected by the DMV at registration.

KEY FACTS

State	California
Agency	California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV)
Process	See official source
Notary required	No
Bill of sale	Conditional
Odometer disclosure	Yes
Filing deadline	10 days
Last reviewed	May 10, 2026

QUICK REFERENCE

NOTARY No	BILL OF SALE Conditional	ODOMETER Yes	INSPECTION Yes
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IMPORTANT DEADLINES

Within 10 days

Buyer must submit title transfer application within 10 days of purchase

PRINTABLE CHECKLIST

Buyer checklist

- ☐ **Signed title from seller** **REQUIRED**
The seller must have signed the title over to you. Check that the odometer reading is noted.
- ☐ **Bill of sale** **RECOMMENDED**
Proof of purchase with VIN, price, and both parties' information.
- ☐ **Government-issued photo ID** **REQUIRED**
Required when submitting title transfer paperwork.
- ☐ **Payment for title transfer fees** **REQUIRED**
Fees vary by state. Check your state's official DMV fee schedule.
- ☐ **Proof of insurance** **REQUIRED**
Most states require proof of minimum liability insurance before issuing plates.
- ☐ **Sales tax payment** **CONDITIONAL**
Sales or use tax is typically due when registering the vehicle. Rate and basis vary by state.

Required forms

- ☐ **Signed title from seller** **REQUIRED**
The seller must sign the title over to you. Verify the VIN and odometer reading.
- ☐ **Title transfer application** **REQUIRED**
Form required to apply for a new title in your name. Requirements vary by state.



FEES

Title transfer fee + registration fees + use tax (Use the DMV fee calculator. Use tax (state rate plus local) is collected by the DMV at registration.)

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

Notary: No — California generally does not require notarization to buy a used car from a private seller.

Bill of sale: Conditional — Not required by law but strongly recommended as proof of purchase.

Odometer disclosure: Yes — Seller must complete odometer disclosure on the title for vehicles under 10 years old.

Inspection: Yes — Seller must provide a valid smog certificate for most vehicles 1976 and newer. Some exemptions apply (vehicles 4 years old or newer, diesel vehicles, and electric vehicles).

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

- 1 Request a vehicle history report (CARFAX/NMVTIS) before purchase.
- 2 Ensure seller provides a valid smog certificate (if required).
- 3 Seller signs the back of the title and completes odometer disclosure.
- 4 Obtain a bill of sale with VIN, price, date, and both parties' information.
- 5 Submit the signed title, smog certificate, and fees to a CA DMV office within 10 days.
- 6 Pay use tax and registration fees at the DMV.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Missing the 10-day title transfer deadline — late penalty fees apply.
- Accepting a title without a valid smog certificate when one is required.
- Not verifying the seller's name matches the title.
- Failing to check for outstanding liens before purchase.

OFFICIAL SOURCES

CA DMV — Transfer of Title

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/vehicle-registration/titles/title-transfers-and-changes/>

CA DMV — Smog Information

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/vehicle-registration/smog-inspections/>

California DMV

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov>

CA DMV Forms

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/forms/>