Private car sale checklist

What the seller and the buyer each need to do — before, at and after the sale. Plates, taxes, deadlines and notarization differ by state, so check your state's rules where the list says so.

Seller

BEFORE THE SALE

- [ ] Find the certificate of title. If a lender still holds it, arrange the payoff and get the lien release in writing.
- [ ] Gather the service records, the owner's manual and every key and remote.
- [ ] Check your state's rules: who keeps the plates, whether the title signature must be notarized, how the odometer is disclosed, and whether you must file a release of liability or notice of sale.
- [ ] Decide the price and how you will be paid, and plan to verify the payment before anything changes hands: count cash together; confirm a cashier's check with the issuing bank at a number you look up yourself, not one printed on the check; watch a transfer arrive in your own account. Funds showing as "available" do not mean a check has cleared — a fake check can take weeks to be discovered.

AT THE SALE

- [ ] Check the buyer's photo ID against the name you write on the bill of sale.
- [ ] Complete and sign the bill of sale together, in one sitting, so both copies match. Each of you keeps a signed copy.
- [ ] Make the exchange in the same sitting: once you have verified the payment, sign the title over, write the odometer reading where the title asks for it, and hand over the title and keys. Do not leave the buyer's name blank, and do not release the title or keys before the full price is verified.
- [ ] If the buyer cannot pay the full price now, do not complete the sale today. A deposit and a later completion belong in a separate written agreement, and the title stays with you until then.

AFTER THE SALE

- [ ] Remove the plates if your state says they stay with you.
- [ ] File the release of liability or notice of sale with your state's agency, if it has one, within its deadline.
- [ ] Cancel or transfer the insurance only after the sale is reported and the plates are dealt with. Some states, Georgia for example, require you to cancel the registration before the insurance to avoid a lapse penalty.
- [ ] Keep your copy of the bill of sale and any receipt from the title transfer.

Buyer

BEFORE THE SALE

- [ ] Ask to see the title. Check that the seller's name matches their ID and that no open lien is shown — or that the lien release is with the paperwork.
- [ ] Compare the VIN on the title with the VIN on the car (dashboard plate and driver's door jamb).
- [ ] Get a vehicle history report and an independent pre-purchase inspection, and test-drive the car.
- [ ] Check your state's deadlines and costs: title transfer, registration, sales or use tax, and any inspection or emissions test.

AT THE SALE

- [ ] Complete and sign the bill of sale with the seller in one sitting, and check that both copies match.
- [ ] Make the exchange in the same sitting: the seller verifies your payment, then signs the title over and hands you the title, the lien release if there was a loan, the keys and your signed copy of the bill of sale. Do not pay a seller who cannot hand over the signed title at the same time.
- [ ] Make sure the odometer reading is written where your state requires it and matches the dash.
- [ ] Get the seller's contact details and the service records.

AFTER THE SALE

- [ ] Insure the car before you drive it. Nearly every state requires it, and the registration usually cannot be issued without it.
- [ ] Apply for the title and registration within your state's deadline and pay the tax due; late transfers usually cost extra.
- [ ] Keep the bill of sale with the title paperwork. It is your record of the price and the date.

Checklist for a private sale between individuals. Dealers have separate obligations. It does not replace your state's title, registration or official forms.