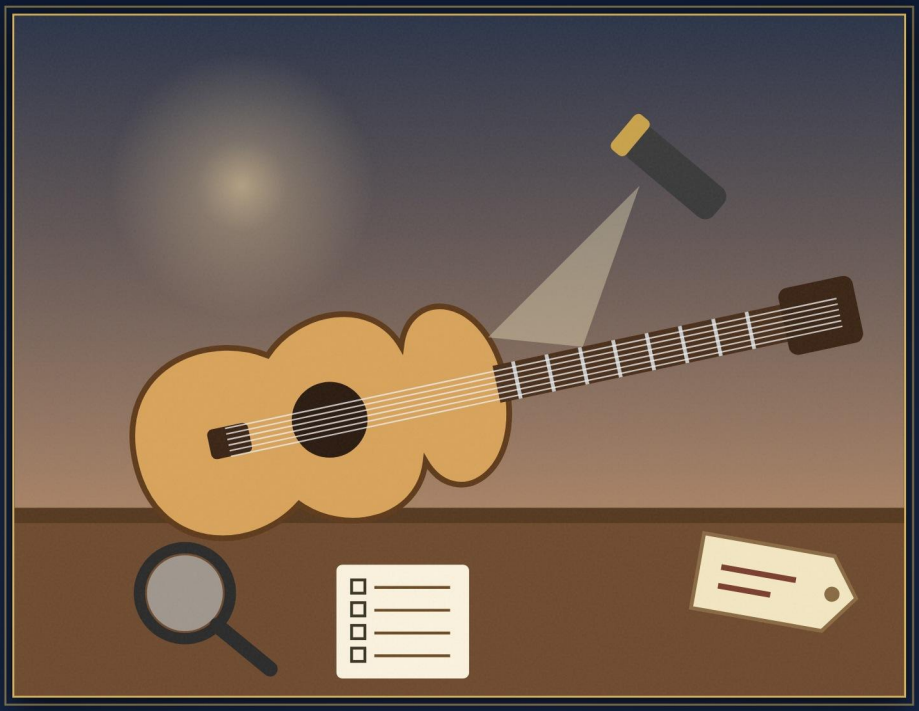
A TRINFINITY GUITAR SHOP GUIDE

Buying a Used Guitar

Know What to Look For Before You Pay



The Inspection Checklist

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Trinfinity Enterprises

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Buying a Used Guitar: The Inspection Checklist

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Guitar work notice. A soldering iron is hot enough to burn you and start a fire, solder and flux fumes should not be breathed, and lead solder is toxic. Work where there is good air flow, wear eye protection, wash your hands after, and keep tools and chemicals away from children. Never open or work inside an amplifier or anything that plugs into the wall. Amplifiers can hold a deadly charge even when unplugged. Take that work to a qualified technician. Changes to an instrument can affect its value and its warranty.

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Before You Begin

A good used guitar is one of the best buys in music. A bad one can cost more to fix than it is worth. The difference is usually visible in ten minutes, if you know where to look.

I build and repair guitars, and this pamphlet walks through the same things I look at on a used instrument. Take it with you. Work through it in order, and do not let a friendly seller rush you.

What This Pamphlet Is and Is Not

This is a buyer's checklist for solid-body electric guitars and steel-string acoustics. It is not an appraisal. For vintage or high-value instruments, pay a qualified repair technician or appraiser to inspect the guitar before you buy.

Chapter 1: Before You Go

Know the Fair Price

Look up what the exact model actually sells for, not what sellers are asking.

- **Reverb Price Guide:** Reverb says its guide shows real, final prices paid. Each product page shows an estimated used value, based on recent sales in good or better condition, and a transaction history of final sale prices without shipping and tax. On a desktop computer you can filter by model and condition.
- **Completed sales on auction sites:** filter for sold items, not active listings.
- **Local shops:** what a shop charges for the same model used, and what it would pay you.

Write down a fair range. Then plan to come down from it for anything you find that needs fixing.

What to Bring

☐ Clip-on tuner

☐ A cable you know works, and a small amp or headphone amp (for electrics)

☐ A small flashlight

☐ A capo

☐ This checklist and a pen

☐ Your phone, to photograph the serial number and any problems

Paying Safely

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) says to pay with a credit card or a secure payment system that protects buyers. It warns against wire transfers, gift cards, cash reload cards and cryptocurrency, because money sent those ways generally cannot be recovered. If you buy through an online marketplace, the FTC says never to pay outside the marketplace's payment system, or you lose its protection. Keep copies of every message with the seller.

For a local sale, meet in a busy public place in daylight, bring a friend, and do not carry more cash than the deal needs.

Chapter 2: The Neck

The neck is the most important and most expensive part to fix. Check it first.

Straightness

1. Tune the guitar to pitch.
2. Hold the guitar at the body end and sight down the edge of the fretboard from the headstock, like looking down a rifle barrel. Look along both the bass and treble edges.
3. A slight, even forward bow is normal. Look for a sharp bend, a hump near where the neck meets the body, or a twist where the two edges do not match.

Relief Check

1. Put a capo on the first fret.
2. Press the low E string down at the last fret.
3. Look at the gap between the string and the top of the frets around the 7th or 8th fret. A small gap is normal. Strings touching there, or a large gap, means the neck needs adjustment.

Truss Rod

Ask the seller whether the truss rod adjusts freely. If it is maxed out, frozen or stripped, the neck may not be fixable without major work. Do not adjust someone else's guitar without permission.

Neck Joint and Headstock

- **Bolt-on necks:** look for gaps or cracked finish around the neck pocket, and stripped or mismatched screws.

- **Set necks:** look for a crack line at the heel where the neck meets the body.
- **Headstock:** look closely behind the nut and on the back of the headstock for crack lines, a line in the finish, or a patch of different-looking finish. Angled headstocks break here more than anywhere else. A well-repaired break can be sound, but it lowers the value a great deal, and it should be disclosed.

Chapter 3: Frets and Playability

Look

Shine the flashlight across the frets. Look at the first five to seven frets under the strings. Worn frets have flat spots or grooves where the strings press. Light wear is normal. Deep grooves mean a fret level and crown, or a refret, which is a major cost.

Play Every Fret

Play every fret on every string, one at a time, from the first fret to the top of the neck. Listen for:

- **Buzzing** on certain frets only: a high or loose fret, or neck relief out of adjustment.
- **Dead notes** that choke out: a high fret just above the note.
- **Notes that will not ring** high on the neck: low action or a hump in the neck.

Action and Intonation

- Is the action (string height) comfortable? Very high action on an acoustic can be a sign of a neck angle problem (Chapter 5).
- Tune the open string, then play the 12th fret. If the 12th-fret note is badly sharp or flat on several strings and the saddles are already at the end of their travel, look closer.

Fret Ends

Run your hand along both edges of the fretboard. Sharp fret ends that stick out mean the wood has shrunk. It is a common and fixable problem, but it is a cost.

Chapter 4: Body, Finish and Hardware

Cracks Versus Finish Checking

- **Finish checking** is fine lines in the finish only, often in a pattern, common on older lacquer finishes. It is usually cosmetic.
- **Cracks** go into the wood. Look along the grain, at the edges, around the jack and control cavities, and near strap buttons. Press gently near a suspect line and watch whether it moves.

Repairs and Refinishes

Look for signs of past work: a finish that does not match from front to back, overspray in cavities or on the fretboard edge, filled holes, or extra screw holes from parts that were changed. Ask the seller what has been repaired or replaced. Repairs are not always bad, but a seller who hides them is a warning sign.

Hardware

- ☐ Tuners turn smoothly and hold pitch; none are bent or missing
- ☐ Bridge and saddles are not heavily rusted; height screws turn
- ☐ Tremolo returns to pitch (if fitted)
- ☐ Strap buttons are tight
- ☐ No stripped screw holes
- ☐ Parts match the model (ask about any replacements and whether the originals come with it)

The Serial Number

Photograph the serial number. Many makers have a serial lookup on their website that shows the year. Make sure it matches what the seller says. If the serial is sanded off or missing, walk away.

Chapter 5: Acoustic Guitars: Extra Checks

Top and Bridge

- **Bridge lifting:** look at the back edge of the bridge. Try to slide a sheet of paper under it. If paper slides in, the bridge is lifting and must be reglued.
- **Top bulge:** some rise behind the bridge is normal on an older guitar. A large bulge, or a sunken area in front of the bridge, can mean structural trouble.
- **Cracks:** look at the top around the soundhole, the bridge and the lower edges; the sides near the waist; and the back. Shine the flashlight inside and look at the braces for loose ends.

Neck Angle

- Look at the saddle. A saddle that has been sanded down almost flush with the bridge, or a bridge that has been shaved thinner, often means the neck angle has changed and the guitar needs a neck reset, one of the most expensive acoustic repairs.
- High action that cannot be lowered with the saddle points the same way.

Dryness

Dry air causes cracks, sharp fret ends and a sunken top. In a dry climate like Northern Nevada's high desert, this matters even more. Ask how the guitar was stored and whether it was humidified.

Pickups in Acoustics

If it has a pickup, plug it in and check every control. Check the battery compartment for corrosion.

Chapter 6: Electronics

Plug into the amp at low volume.

- ☐ Every pickup works in every switch position
- ☐ Tap each pickup with a screwdriver tip: a clear tap from each
- ☐ Each knob turns smoothly without crackling or cutting out
- ☐ The switch does not crackle or cut out when moved
- ☐ Wiggle the cable at the jack: no crackle or cutting out
- ☐ The jack is tight and does not spin
- ☐ No loud hum that gets worse when you touch the strings
- ☐ Look in the control cavity, if the seller allows: neat joints, no burned or broken wires

Scratchy pots, a loose jack and a worn switch are cheap fixes. Use them to negotiate, not as reasons to walk away. Dead pickups and messy amateur rewiring cost more. The companion book Guitar Wiring and Soldering, Step by Step covers these fixes.

Chapter 7: Making the Deal

Walk Away If

- The neck is badly bowed, twisted, or the truss rod will not adjust.
- There is an undisclosed headstock break or a structural crack.
- An acoustic needs a neck reset and the price does not reflect it.
- The serial number is missing or the story does not add up.
- The seller insists on wire transfer, gift cards or cryptocurrency, or wants to deal outside the marketplace.

Negotiate For

- Worn strings and a needed setup.
- Light fret wear.
- Scratchy pots, a loose jack or a worn switch.
- Missing case or original parts.
- Sharp fret ends.

Get a rough repair estimate from a local shop if you are not sure what a fix costs, and subtract it from your fair price range.

Get It in Writing

Get a simple written bill of sale: date, make, model, serial number, price, and both names. For a high-value guitar, ask for any original receipt.

One-Page Inspection Checklist

Check	OK?	Notes
Fair price range looked up	____	
Neck straight, no twist	____	
Relief normal (capo test)	____	
Truss rod adjusts	____	
Neck joint and headstock: no cracks or breaks	____	
Fret wear light	____	
Every fret plays clean	____	
Action and intonation OK	____	
No sharp fret ends	____	
Body: no wood cracks	____	
Repairs and replaced parts disclosed	____	
Tuners, bridge, hardware OK	____	
Serial number photographed and matches	____	

Check	OK?	Notes
Acoustic: bridge tight, no bulge, saddle not shaved	____	
Electronics: all positions, knobs and jack OK	____	
Safe payment method	____	
Bill of sale	____	

Acronyms

FTC. Federal Trade Commission

Sources

All web pages were read on November 18, 2026.

- Federal Trade Commission, Buying From an Online Marketplace (consumer.ftc.gov).
- Reverb, How To Use the Reverb Price Guide.

About This Pamphlet

Buying a Used Guitar: The Inspection Checklist is part of a set of free plain-language guides from Trinfinity Enterprises, alongside the Trinfinity guitar books. It is general information, not an appraisal. If you find something that needs correcting, please write to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.