

Steer Clear of Auto Repair Scams

Written by Jason Alderman
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If you feel frustrated or intimidated whenever you take your car in for repairs, you're not alone. According to the Federal Trade Commission and the Better Business Bureau, auto repair fraud consistently ranks among the top consumer complaints they receive.

Although most auto repair shops are legitimate, some unscrupulous operators will rip off inexperienced car owners by performing unnecessary or unauthorized repairs, substituting counterfeit or used replacement parts, or even doing such shoddy work that lives are endangered.

Here are tips for becoming a more informed consumer and a few common scams to avoid:

Try to have a trusted repair shop already lined up before you need one. Ask friends or your auto insurance company for recommendations, or search the Better Business Bureau's website (www.bbb.org) for accredited businesses. Also:

- Ask the state Attorney General's office (www.naag.org) whether any complaints have been filed against prospective mechanics.

- Look for mechanics currently certified by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (www.ase.com) or who belong to your insurer's authorized repair network.

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- If your car's warranty is still in force, you may be required to use only authorized dealerships.

If your car needs major work, gather several estimates for comparison. Once you've chosen a shop, ask for a detailed estimate (with no sections left blank) before you authorize repairs. Specify that you must be called to grant permission before additional repairs. Make sure the work order clearly specifies:

- Repairs to be done.
- All fees, including parts, labor, storage, loaner car, etc.
- Whether new, reconditioned, or used parts will be used.
- Acceptable payment methods.
- Completion date.
- Diagnostic or reassembly charges if you decide to get a second opinion or have the work done elsewhere.

Make sure the final repair bill contains itemizes all work completed and parts used. (Ask them to show you the work done and replaced parts.) Also have the bill spell out any guaranteed items (including exclusions), in case problems occur later and you need contractual proof.

Watch out for these common scams:

- They give you a verbal estimate then charge a higher price. Always get it in writing.
- A shop lures you in with low-cost specials (oil change, brake inspection, etc.), then pads the work order with other repairs you don't want or need. If in doubt, have the initial work done and get a second opinion on the rest, unless there's an immediate safety issue.
- Charging for services that are covered under the car's warranty. (Always read your warranty carefully.)
- Dishonest mechanics have been known to inflict intentional damage during an inspection in order to boost needed repairs.
- They don't want to return replaced parts to you, which could mean the work wasn't actually done, or they used inferior parts. (Keep in mind that there could be discarded parts lying around that they could pass off as yours.)
- Going against your car manufacturer's recommendations. If your manual recommends getting an oil change every 10,000 miles but the mechanic says every 3,000, make sure there's a good reason.
- Offers to waive the deductible – for example, offering to install a used part and bill your insurance company for a new one. This insurance fraud could land you in a world of hurt.

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- High-pressure sales tactics.

Just because you don't completely understand what goes on under the hood doesn't mean you can't protect yourself against auto repair scams. To learn more, visit the FTC's comprehensive Auto Repair Basics site at www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0211-auto-repair-basics .