California private car sale checklist

Private-party seller steps — check each box as you complete it.

Before you list

- ☐ Locate the California certificate of title. If lost, apply with REG 227.
- ☐ Confirm how names appear on the title: "AND" means every co-owner must sign; "OR" means one owner's signature can transfer.
- ☐ Still paying off a loan? Contact the lender early for payoff and lien release steps before you list.
- ☐ Plan for a smog inspection unless exempt: electric vehicles; gasoline vehicles model year 1975 or older; gasoline or hybrid vehicles four or fewer model years old (not diesel); or a qualifying family transfer on the listed exemptions.
- ☐ Gather maintenance and repair records to share with buyers.
- ☐ Disclose salvage or other branded title history. See California branded titles.

Sale day

- ☐ Verify payment clears before you sign the title.
- ☐ Every required owner signs and dates the title on Line 1 (transfer section on the back).
- ☐ Record odometer reading for model year 2011 and newer vehicles as required on the title.
- ☐ Give the buyer a valid smog certificate. If you rely on a certificate from the last 90 days (for example from your registration renewal), sign and give REG 139 and keep a copy (VC §5751.5).
- ☐ Complete a bill of sale (REG 135) if your name is not on the title or you want a written record.
- ☐ Hand over the current registration card when available.
- ☐ Photograph the signed title before the buyer leaves.
- ☐ License plates usually stay on the vehicle in California unless you remove them voluntarily.

Within 5 calendar days

Sellers must file notice of transfer promptly — see VC §5900.

- ☐ File notice of transfer and release of liability (NRL) online at dmv.ca.gov or mail REG 138 within 5 calendar days of the sale.
- ☐ Save the confirmation number or mailed receipt.

After

- ☐ Update or cancel insurance after your NRL is filed, not before.
- ☐ Keep copies of the title photo, bill of sale, and NRL proof.
- ☐ Buyer should transfer registration within 10 days — not your filing, but worth reminding them.

Sources: DMV: Notice of Transfer (NRL) · DMV: smog inspections · DMV: title transfers · REG 135 PDF · REG 227 PDF

CA Car Seller Kit by Scott Moll · Reviewed on 2026-11-27

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