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The Pre-Purchase Toolkit

Everything to check before you hand over money for a watch, new or pre-owned: a printable inspection checklist, the questions that make a seller tell you the truth, where to find serial numbers brand by brand, how to work out a fair price in ten minutes, and what to do in the first 48 hours after you buy.

Written for people spending their own money. No sponsored advice; the only commercial links are disclosed affiliate links, which never change what we recommend.

How to use this toolkit

Eight short sections. Print pages 3 to 5 and take them to the viewing.

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The one rule. A seller who is genuine never minds you checking. Every step here is normal due diligence that a good dealer does themselves before listing a watch. If someone makes you feel awkward for asking, that is information.

Who this is for. First serious watch or tenth; buying a new Tudor at an authorised dealer, a pre-owned Submariner from a grey dealer, or a Grand Seiko from a private seller. Steps that only apply to pre-owned purchases are marked.

Prices and service costs quoted are typical ranges in US dollars at the time of writing, gathered from brand service centres and authorised dealers. They drift; the checklist does not. Current figures for any reference are in the buying guides on thewatchology.com.

The short version, if you read nothing else

- Know the fair price before you look at the watch, not after. Emotion sets in at the viewing.
- Match three numbers: the reference on the case, the serial on the case, and the serial on the warranty card. Any mismatch is a different conversation about price, or no conversation.
- Papers can be forged; a service history with a brand service centre's invoice usually cannot. Ask for it.
- Pay in a way you can reverse. Wire transfers to individuals cannot be reversed.
- Have the watch checked by an independent watchmaker within 48 hours, while your buyer protection still applies.

1. Before you go: the 10-minute price check

Do this at your desk, before you message the seller. Write the numbers down.

STEP	WHAT TO DO	WRITE IT HERE
Current retail	Brand website or an authorised dealer's price list, for the exact reference and metal. Note whether it is actually available at retail or wait-listed.	_____
Market median	Chrono24's price trend for the reference (sold-price history, not asking prices), cross-checked against WatchCharts. Use the median, not the cheapest listing.	_____
Recent sold prices	eBay with "Sold items" filtered on; auction results if the reference is collectible. Three recent sales give you the real range.	_____
Full-set premium	Box, papers, warranty card and all links typically add 5–15% over a naked watch for modern references; far more for vintage.	_____
Warranty remaining	Rolex and Tudor 5 years, Omega 5 years, Grand Seiko 5 years (3 in some markets), Panerai 2 years extendable to 8 on registration. Remaining warranty has real value.	_____
Your ceiling	Decide the most you will pay for this watch in this condition before you see it. Then do not move it.	_____

Reading an asking price

A grey-market or pre-owned price sits in one of three places relative to the market median. Around the median with a full set and warranty is normal. Well above the median is a dealer pricing for the uninformed, or a watch with provenance you should be able to verify. Well below the median is the one that needs the most care: it is either a motivated seller, a watch with a problem (replaced parts, undisclosed service, a polished case), or not a real watch at all.

For references that trade above retail (steel Rolex sports models, some Patek and AP), the retail price is not the benchmark; the market median is. For everything else, a pre-owned price above about 85% of retail needs a reason, because authorised dealers discount many non-Rolex brands at the counter if you ask.

Buying abroad or online from another country. Compare like with like: US prices exclude sales tax, UK and EU prices include 20% or so VAT that visitors can sometimes reclaim, Japanese retail is quoted with consumption tax that tourists do not pay in duty-free shops, and Singapore and Hong Kong quote with or without local tax depending on the shop. A "cheaper" price abroad can disappear once you add import duty and tax at home. Our price comparisons on thewatchology.com show the landed figure.

2. Questions to ask the seller

Ask in writing before you travel. Keep the thread; it is your record if something is misdescribed.

ASK	WHAT A GOOD ANSWER LOOKS LIKE
Can you send a photo of the serial number and the reference number on the case, and of the warranty card?	Three clear photos within a day. A refusal, or "the card is at my other house", ends it.
Has the watch been serviced? By whom, and when? May I see the invoice?	A dated invoice from the brand's service centre or a named independent. "Serviced recently" with no paper is worth nothing.
Has the case ever been polished?	Honest sellers know. "Lightly polished at last service" is normal; "never" on a 15-year-old watch with soft lugs is a lie.
Are all parts original to the watch? Dial, hands, bezel insert, crown, crystal, bracelet, clasp?	A specific answer. Service replacement parts are fine if disclosed and priced in.
Are all bracelet links included? What is the current fitted size?	Missing links cost real money on Rolex and Omega bracelets. Ask for the link count.
How does it keep time? Any issues with the date change, the crown, the bezel action?	A seconds-per-day figure, ideally from a timegrapher photo.
Why are you selling?	Not a test of the answer, a test of the hesitation.
Can I have it inspected by a watchmaker before paying, or within a return window after?	Yes. Any dealer confident in the watch says yes. Private sellers should accept a bank-branch meeting and a short inspection window.
What is your return policy, in writing?	Dealers: 7–14 days is standard. Platforms: Chrono24's Buyer Protection is 14 days. Private: none, which is why you inspect first.
Can you provide a dated photo of the watch next to today's newspaper or a note with my name?	Filters out stock photos and re-listed images in under a minute.

For a new watch at an authorised dealer

- Is the warranty card going to be stamped and dated today, with this store's stamp? (It should be. An undated card is a grey-market tell later.)
- Is this piece from current stock or a display piece? Display watches live under lights and get handled; ask for a discount or a sealed one.
- What is the exact reference and dial code on the card, and does it match the box label?
- Will you size the bracelet now and give me every removed link?

3. The inspection checklist

Print this page. Bring a loupe (10x is plenty), your phone torch and the numbers from page 3. Allow twenty minutes and do not let anyone rush you.

Numbers

- ☐ **Reference** on the case matches the card and the listing.
- ☐ **Serial** on the case matches the card. Engraving is crisp and even, not shallow or wobbly.
- ☐ **Card** is the right generation for the serial (see page 6), stamped and dated by a real dealer.
- ☐ **Box** label, hang tags and booklet match the reference. (Nice to have, not proof of anything.)

Case and bracelet

- ☐ **Lugs** keep their edges and bevels. Rounded, softened lugs mean heavy polishing.
- ☐ **Case sides** are flat with even brushing; polished surfaces have no "wavy" reflections.
- ☐ **Case back** engravings are sharp; the back opens without tool marks around it.
- ☐ **Caseback and lugs** show no corrosion, pitting or filled scratches.
- ☐ **Bracelet stretch**: hold it vertically; links should hang tight, not sag. End links sit flush with no gap.
- ☐ **Clasp** closes with a positive click; micro-adjust works; clasp code or year matches the watch's era.
- ☐ **Spring bars** look original (brand-marked on Rolex and Omega) and the holes are not elongated.

Crystal and bezel

- ☐ **Crystal** free of chips at the edge; the cyclops (Rolex) is centred over the date.
- ☐ **Bezel** clicks cleanly through every position with no back-play; insert is original with the right font and lume pip.
- ☐ **Crown** screws down smoothly and sits straight; the brand logo on the crown is correct for the reference.

Dial and hands

- ☐ **Lume** colour on the hands matches the hour markers exactly under the torch. Mismatch means a replaced hand set.
- ☐ **Printing** is sharp under the loupe; no fuzzy letters, misaligned text or spelling errors.
- ☐ **Markers** are all present, straight and secured; no dust or fibres under the crystal.
- ☐ **Dial surface** has no spots, lifted lacquer or signs of refinishing (overly perfect on an old watch is suspicious).
- ☐ **Date wheel** font matches the brand's; the date sits centred in the window.

Movement, without opening it

- ☐ **Winding**: on a manual or hand-windable automatic, 20 turns feel smooth, no grinding.
- ☐ **Setting**: the hands move cleanly, no slack; hacking stops the seconds hand if the movement has it.
- ☐ **Date**: quick-set works; the date flips close to midnight when the hands are advanced.
- ☐ **Rotor**: a gentle shake produces a quiet whirr, not a rattle or a scrape.
- ☐ **Timegrapher** or a phone app for two minutes: within the brand's spec (Rolex Superlative $-2/+2$ s/d; Omega METAS $0/+5$; Grand Seiko $+5/-3$ for 9S mechanical; most ETA/Sellita $-4/+6$ after service). Amplitude above about 250° dial-up on a serviced watch.
- ☐ **Chronograph**: start, stop and reset to zero exactly; hands return without a stutter.

Exhibition casebacks

- ☐ **Movement finishing** matches reference photos of the calibre; engravings are correct; no discoloured screws or scratches around screw heads.
- ☐ **No moisture**, no dust, no fingerprints on the inside of the crystal.

Score it. Any "no" in the Numbers section: walk away. Any "no" in Dial and hands: renegotiate hard or walk. Anything else: price it in, using the service costs on page 10.

4. Serial and reference numbers, brand by brand

Where to look, and what the number can tell you. Photograph both numbers at the viewing.

BRAND	WHERE THE SERIAL IS	WHERE THE REFERENCE IS	WHAT TO CHECK
Rolex	Engraved on the rehaut (the inner ring) at 6 o'clock on watches from about 2008 onward; between the lugs at 6 o'clock on older pieces (remove the bracelet to see it).	Between the lugs at 12 o'clock, under the bracelet end link.	Random 8-character serials since 2010 carry no date, so the warranty card date is the dating evidence. "ROLEXROLEXROLEX" on the rehaut should be perfectly aligned with the markers, with the crown at 12 and the serial at 6.
Tudor	Between the lugs at 6 o'clock; newer models also on the rehaut.	Between the lugs at 12 o'clock.	Card should be the plastic credit-card type for recent watches, with the dealer stamp and date; Tudor's 5-year warranty applies to watches sold from 2020.
Omega	8-digit serial engraved on the case back, on a lug back, or under the lug depending on model; also printed on the warranty card.	Full PIC number (e.g. 210.30.42.20.01.001) on the card and the inner case back or lug.	Omega can confirm a serial's production details through a boutique. Master Chronometer watches have a METAS certificate card and a serialised movement; ask to see both numbers.
Panerai	Case back: an alphanumeric serial plus the "OP" number and a letter code for the production year (e.g. "T" for 2017 in the modern sequence); the PAM number is not on the watch.	PAM reference is on the warranty card and the box label only.	Match the OP number and serial on the case back to the card; Panerai cards from 2017 are the plastic type. Check the Panerai "Passport" booklet if present for the matching serial.
Grand Seiko	6-digit serial on the case back: first digit is the last digit of the production year, second is the month (1–9, O/N/D for Oct–Dec).	Calibre-case code (e.g. 9R65-0AE0) on the case back; retail reference (e.g. SBGA211) on the card and box only.	Decode the year yourself and compare to the warranty date; a 2019 serial with a 2024 card means old stock, which affects price.
Seiko	6-digit serial on the case back, same year/month logic as Grand Seiko.	Calibre-case code on the case back (e.g. 6R35-00A0); model number (e.g. SPB143) on the box and card.	Many Seiko divers share case codes across several models, so confirm dial and bezel against official photos of the model number.
Cartier	Case back: serial plus a 4-digit reference; modern pieces also carry a QR-style code.	Case back.	Cartier can verify a serial at a boutique with the card; secret signatures on the dial (in the roman numeral VII or X) are hard to see without a loupe and often missing on fakes.
IWC / Breitling / Zenith	Case back serial; Breitling also on the card with a 6-character dealer code.	Case back reference (IWC IW-number, Breitling A/AB-number).	All three brands have online warranty registration; a seller who registered the watch can show you the record.

Warranty card generations matter. Rolex: paper warranty through 2006, then green plastic card with a magnetic-looking strip, then the current white-and-green card from 2020. Omega: red booklet then the current plastic card with METAS card for Master Chronometer. A card from the wrong era for the serial is a stronger red flag than no card at all.

5. Red flags that end the conversation

Any one of these is enough. You do not owe the seller an explanation.

The listing

- Stock photos or photos lifted from another listing (reverse-image-search them; it takes a minute).
- Price 20% or more below the market median with no stated reason.
- "Box and papers" that turn out to be a generic box and a photocopied card.
- Serial number blurred or covered in every photo "for privacy". Covering the last few digits is normal; covering all of it is not.
- Listed as "unworn" or "BNIB" while photos show stickers removed, bracelet sized, or wear on the clasp.
- A warranty card dated earlier than the reference was released, or a dealer stamp from a shop that does not carry the brand.

The seller

- Will not meet at a bank branch, authorised dealer or watchmaker, or will not allow an inspection window.
- Pushes for a wire transfer, cryptocurrency, "friends and family" payment or a gift card. These cannot be reversed.
- Creates urgency: "another buyer is coming at 5pm", "price goes up tomorrow".
- Asks you to pay a deposit before you have seen the watch, to "hold" it.
- Account created last month with no history, or a dealer with no physical address and no company registration you can find.
- Will ship only via a courier you have never heard of, or asks you to declare a low value on customs.

The watch

- Lume on the hands a different colour or brightness from the markers (replaced hands).
- Rehaut engraving (Rolex) misaligned with the markers, or the serial font looks different from the "ROLEX" text.
- Case back that has clearly been opened by someone without the right tool: scratches radiating from the notches.
- Reference and serial numbers that look laser-etched too deeply, too shallow, or with uneven spacing.
- A "service dial" or "service bezel" presented as original. Fine if disclosed, a problem if not.
- Loud rotor, rough winding, seconds hand that stutters, or a date that changes at 11:40.
- Moisture, dust or fibres under the crystal.
- A frankenwatch: correct parts from several different watches assembled into one, often with a genuine serial on a case that did not originally hold that movement.

Super-clones. The best counterfeits of steel Rolex sports models now get the weight, the bezel action and even the movement decoration close enough to fool a quick look. The things they still get wrong: rehaut alignment and font, the quality of the lume application under a loupe, the crown and clasp engraving depth, and the timegrapher trace. If the price is too good, assume this until a watchmaker tells you otherwise.

6. Paying safely

The rule is simple: pay in a way you can reverse until you have had the watch checked.

ROUTE	PROTECTION YOU GET	HOW TO USE IT WELL
Authorised dealer	Full manufacturer warranty from the date of sale; the dealer's own return policy; credit-card chargeback rights.	Pay by card where possible even if the dealer prefers transfer; ask for a cash or transfer discount only if it is large enough to be worth giving up the card protection. Get the warranty card stamped and dated in front of you.
Grey-market or pre-owned dealer	Dealer's own warranty (often 12–24 months), return window, and card protection if you pay by card. Reputable dealers have a registered company, a physical address and years of reviews.	Check company registration and the address on a map. Read the return policy before paying; "all sales final" on a four-figure pre-owned watch is a reason to buy elsewhere.
Chrono24 Trusted Checkout	Money held in escrow until you confirm receipt; 14-day Buyer Protection; authenticity guarantee process.	Never let a Chrono24 seller move you off-platform for a "better price": the saving is exactly the protection you lose. Open and film the parcel, inspect, and confirm only after your watchmaker check.
eBay (Authenticity Guarantee)	Watches over the threshold price are routed to an authenticator before delivery; Money Back Guarantee.	Still do your own inspection on arrival; authentication confirms the watch is genuine, not that it is unpolished or recently serviced.
Private sale, in person	None, except what you negotiate.	Meet inside a bank branch during opening hours; many banks will let you use a private room for a transfer. Better still, meet at a watchmaker who can inspect on the spot. Pay by instant bank transfer only after inspection, never before.
Private sale, shipped	PayPal Goods & Services offers buyer protection for a fee; "Friends & Family" offers nothing.	Insist on G&S and pay the fee yourself if you must. Insured, signature-required shipping, declared at full value. Film the unboxing from the sealed parcel.

Three things people regret

- Paying a deposit to hold a watch they had not seen. Deposits to private sellers are gifts.
- Agreeing to "no receipt" for a small discount. The receipt is your proof of purchase for insurance and for resale.
- Letting the seller post it uninsured to save a few dollars on a five-figure watch.

Import duties. If the watch crosses a border to reach you, you are the importer. The US charges modest duty on watches and your state may add sales tax; the UK charges 20% VAT plus duty; EU countries charge VAT at their own rates; Singapore charges GST on the full value including shipping. Budget for it, and never agree to an under-declared value: it voids insurance and can lead to seizure.

7. The first 48 hours after you buy

Your return window and buyer protection are running. Use them.

- ☐ **Film the unboxing** from the sealed parcel, in one take, including the serial. If anything is wrong this is your evidence.
- ☐ **Independent watchmaker check** within 48 hours: timegrapher in six positions, amplitude, beat error, and a visual under magnification. Typical cost \$30–80. For a pre-owned watch bought remotely, this is not optional.
- ☐ **Pressure test** if you intend to swim with it. A pre-owned diver's gaskets are an unknown until tested; most watchmakers test to the rated depth for \$30–60.
- ☐ **Confirm the warranty.** New watches: register online where the brand offers it (Omega, Breitling, IWC, Panerai extension to 8 years, Tudor). Pre-owned: check the card date and whether the brand honours the balance for a second owner (Rolex, Omega and Tudor do; the card travels with the watch).
- ☐ **Photograph everything:** serial, reference, card, box label, receipt, bracelet links. Store the photos somewhere other than your phone.
- ☐ **Insure it.** Options are a scheduled item on home contents insurance, or a specialist watch policy; worldwide cover and "mysterious disappearance" are the clauses that matter. Many home policies cap single items at a few thousand dollars unless scheduled.
- ☐ **Record the purchase** in the log on page 10: price, seller, date, service date. You will need it when you sell.
- ☐ **Size the bracelet properly** and keep every removed link in the box, not a drawer.
- ☐ **Wear it for a week before judging the timekeeping.** A watch that has sat in a safe can run fast or slow for a few days as lubricants redistribute.

If something is wrong

Contact the seller in writing the same day, with the watchmaker's note and your photos. Dealers and platforms resolve most issues quickly when the evidence is clear and the clock is still running. If you paid by card and the seller refuses, your card issuer's dispute process is your next step; keep every message.

Do not "fix" anything first. Having the case back opened or the bracelet changed before you raise an issue gives the seller a reason to refuse. Inspect, document, then talk.

8. Service intervals, costs and your purchase log

Typical full-service costs at brand service centres, in US dollars at the time of writing. Independents are often 30–50% less. Verify before you price a watch.

BRAND / MOVEMENT	RECOMMENDED INTERVAL	TYPICAL FULL SERVICE	NOTE
Rolex (modern calibres)	About 10 years	\$800–1,200 (time-only), more for chronographs	Includes case and bracelet refinishing unless you ask them not to polish. Say so, in writing, if you want to keep the edges.
Tudor (MT in-house)	About 10 years	\$600–900	ETA-based older Tudors: 5–7 years, \$450–700.
Omega Co-Axial / Master Chronometer	5–8 years	\$700–1,100	Omega replaces worn parts as standard; quote comes after inspection.
Panerai (in-house P-calibres)	About 5 years	\$900–1,500	Sandwich dials and vintage-style lume are sensitive; ask about dial handling.
Grand Seiko Spring Drive / 9S	3–4 years recommended; most owners stretch to 5–7	\$450–750	Service in Japan is cheaper; ask your market's GS service point.
Seiko (6R, 4R)	5+ years	\$250–400	Often more economical to replace a 4R movement than service it.
ETA / Sellita (Longines, Tissot, Hamilton, Oris)	5–7 years	\$350–600	Any competent independent can service these.
Cartier, IWC, Breitling, Zenith	5–7 years	\$600–1,200	In-house chronographs sit at the top of the range.

Purchase log

DATE	REFERENCE / SERIAL	SELLER	PRICE PAID	LAST SERVICE / NEXT DUE

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