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## The Sure-Fire, Worry-Free Way to Find A Reliable Mechanic

By Joseph D. Younger

Photographs by Leslie Bird

How much do you trust your auto mechanic? Judging by surveys, almost nobody has faith in the men and women who fix cars. When a recent Gallup Poll asked Americans what they thought about the ethics and honesty of various professions, car mechanics did about as well as local politicians and only slightly better than lawyers—which is to say, not very well at all.

In fact, you might have perfectly good reasons to mistrust mechanics. Year after year, the Consumer Federation of America ranks auto repair among its top five consumer gripes, right alongside home-repair scams and shady used-car dealers. The Federal Trade Commission estimates that Americans spend billions of dollars a year on unnecessary or fraudulent auto repairs.

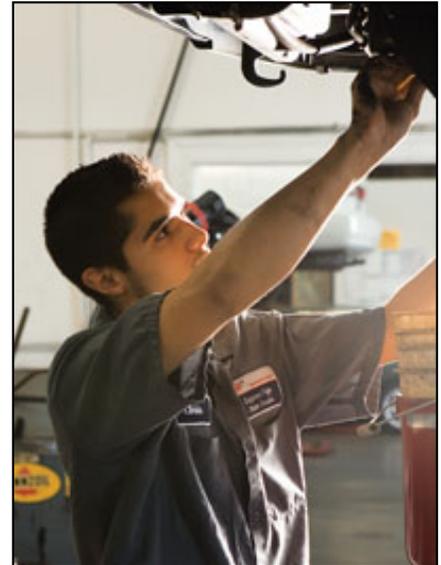
So, who can you trust to fix your car? Experts, such as the FTC and National Association of Attorneys General, suggest asking friends and neighbors for recommendations.

But the Auto Club takes that idea one step further. Its Approved Auto Repair program works like references from trusted friends—except it's more thorough and more empirical. By setting strict standards, regularly inspecting shops, and carefully monitoring customer feedback, the Auto Club separates the best repair facilities from the rest. And it doesn't cost you a dime. "The Auto Club has done all the legwork for you," says Jim Broussard, owner of Doctor J, an AAR facility in Huntington Beach. "It makes sure shops have the credentials and treat their customers honestly, and it stands behind their work."

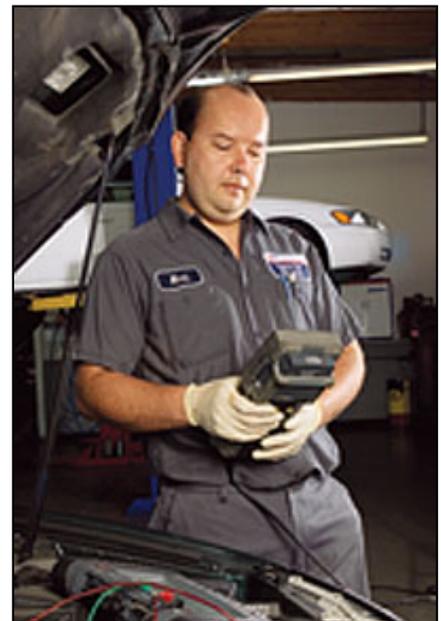
Here's how the program works. The Auto Club asks the questions you would ask about a repair shop, then checks and rechecks its answers. Here are the standards that AAR facilities must meet.

### Does the shop have the right equipment and personnel to do the work?

At the very least, shops must show that they can work on basic mechanical and engine repairs, engine performance (such as tune-ups), brakes, and electrical systems. That means that they must have digital scanners, a four-gas analyzer, and



Service technician Chris Ortega changes a customer's oil at Laguna Viejo Auto Service in Laguna Hills. Shop foreman Mark Brown uses a scan tool to monitor engine performance (below).



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other up-to-date electronic scan tools to do the jobs right.

Shops offering service for automatic or manual transmissions, suspension and steering, and air-conditioning repairs must have the tools for that kind of work, too—or must work with a facility that does. "A shop can subcontract specialty work, such as transmissions," says Dave Skaien, who provides management support for the Auto Club's AAR program. "But the approved shop has to assume first-party accountability for the diagnosis and the work. Most good repair facilities know the best specialty shops in their area, so they're pretty careful about whom they choose for contract work. They know it's their reputation that's on the line."

Specifically, each shop is required to have at least one technician who's certified by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence in each of the areas it offers service—for example, engine repair, heating and air-conditioning, brakes, or transmissions. And the certified techs must stay current in their area of expertise, which means taking regular continuing-education courses.

You'd be surprised how many auto repair shops don't measure up to the Auto Club's training standards. And if you think the government has guidelines for auto repair workers, think again. As Skaien points out, most states require hundreds of hours of training before licensing someone to do manicures in a salon, but absolutely anybody can claim to fix an engine, an air bag, or an antilock braking system. At an AAR shop, you know that you're getting a well-trained, certified technician.

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## Does the shop treat you honestly and courteously?

Here's where the Auto Club gets down to serious business. Before a shop can enter the AAR program, Auto Club field specialists randomly select invoices from the shop's recent files and survey the customers. The battery of questions includes, "Were the personnel courteous and professional in their approach to your problem? Was the car ready when promised? Were you satisfied with the repair work? If not, how did the shop resolve problems?" And perhaps most important, "Would you return to this facility in the future?" In all, the questions cover eight specific areas, and a customer must respond positively in all eight to qualify as "satisfied." The shop must earn a satisfaction rating of 90 percent or better on all questions to get Auto Club approval.



John Esses, owner of Laguna Viejo Auto Service, reviews a repair order with a customer (above). Brown and Ortega at your service (below).



Once in the program, the shop must submit to surprise inspections every couple of months and to a complete reevaluation every year. Auto Club field specialists—all of whom are ASE-certified master automotive technicians themselves—show up unannounced and check everything from the condition of the equipment to the cleanliness of the restrooms. They also dip into the files annually to pull more invoices at random; they survey those customers, too, just to make the sure the shop hasn't slacked off. Again, more than 90 percent of its customers have to be completely satisfied for the facility to maintain Auto Club approval.

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## Does the shop guarantee its work?

All AAR facilities guarantee their work for 12 months/12,000 miles, under normal circumstances. But the real clincher comes if you have a problem with the shop's service or repairs. The Auto Club pledges to mediate any dispute you can't resolve with an AAR shop, and the shop agrees in writing to abide by the Auto Club's decision. "Upon entering the program, the shop signs an

absolutely binding contract, agreeing to accept our decision in any dispute mediation," Skaien says. "Because of that contract, we offer a level of accountability not likely to be found elsewhere."

Not that many disputes ever reach mediation. Last year, for example, AAR shops in Southern California wrote more than 6.3 million invoices for service work. Of those, only 524 member complaints were generated (approximately 1 out of every 12,000 repair orders), and the Auto Club investigated and resolved every one of them.

In an average year, only a few disputes ever rise to the level requiring mediation. Skaien attributes this outstanding customer satisfaction record to the diligence with which Auto Club field specialists investigate shops, the quality of the shops participating, and the tough warranty provisions and accountability that the Auto Club demands.

The vast majority of customers agree. "I don't see how the Auto Club could possibly improve this service," says member Sharon Kelly of California, who had a complaint with an AAR facility resolved fast and fully. "We plan on always using the Auto Club's approved mechanics."

By now you're probably thinking, *All this equipment, training, and accountability must mean that AAR shops are pretty expensive.* Not necessarily. "A good shop will invest in scanners and high-tech equipment to make the right diagnosis," says John Esses, owner of Laguna Viejo Auto Service in Laguna Hills. "At other places, they're guessing at repairs, throwing parts at a problem, and charging customers. That's where you run into problems. In the long run, doing it right the first time saves you money."

AAR shops operate in every segment of the repair industry—from service departments at new-car dealers to independent repair shops to service stations doing repair work. At every facility, a white sign with the characteristic red-and-blue AAA logo and blue letters identifies the facility as "Approved Auto Repair." Or, go to [aaa-calif.com/auto/maintain/aar.aspx](http://aaa-calif.com/auto/maintain/aar.aspx) to find a shop near you. You can also pick up an AAR directory at your local Auto Club office or call (800) 713-0003 and request that a directory be sent to you.

The AAR program can't restore the reputation of an entire industry. But it can point you toward a repair shop with a proven record of honesty, competence, and courtesy. When you need your car fixed, what more can you ask?

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*Joseph D. Younger has written about the automotive industry for more than 25 years.*

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