Why your number plates could fail the MOT this winter (and how to check them in two minutes)

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Demo plates made at the PlateBoss workshop. PL88 BOS is not a real registration.

Number plate spacing –legal (at top)-vs-illegal.

By HD, owner of PlateBoss (all words and photographs from HD).

Note: The number plates shown in the photographs are ‘demonstration’ plates only, not real

plates for road use.

Recently a black cab driver came into our workshop in Hounslow. His front number plate had a crack running through it, and it had just failed the MOT. No plate, no pass, and no pass means no fares. We made him a new one in about five minutes and he went straight back for the retest.

It’s a story we hear all the time. Number plates are one of the easiest things to check before an MOT, and one of the most overlooked. Here’s what goes wrong, why winter makes it worse, and a quick check you can do yourself.

Why plates matter more than people think

Front number plate BMW.

Number plates are part of the MOT. If yours don’t meet the rules, the car fails. On the road, the police can fine you up to £1,000 for plates that are incorrectly displayed or can’t be read. Number plate recognition cameras need to read them too, for everything from speed cameras to car parks and clean air zones.

The MOT fails we see most often

– Cracked, faded or peeling plates. Plates take a battering from stones, car washes and sunlight. Once the characters fade or the reflective surface starts to lift, the plate can fail.
– Loose or missing plates. A plate held on by one screw, or a front

plate that has fallen off altogether.
– The wrong font or spacing. Fancy fonts, italic letters and squashed or moved gaps to make a registration spell a word are not legal, however good they look.
– Missing markings. Every road-legal plate has to show who made it and the British Standard number. For plates made since September 2021 that's BS AU 145e. If those marks aren't there, it's not a legal plate.
– A broken number plate light. It's easy to forget, but the rear plate light is checked too.

The winter problem

In winter we see more plates that are legal but simply can't be read. Road salt and spray leave a grey film over the plate, and on a dark, wet evening the rear plate can disappear altogether. Cameras and police officers don't care whether it's dirty or damaged: if they can't read it, it's a problem. A quick wipe when you fill up with fuel makes a real difference.

3D, 4D and show plates

Raised characters are allowed. 3D gel and 4D plates are fine on the road, as long as they meet the same rules as any other plate: the right font and spacing, black characters on a white front and yellow rear plate, a single shade of black, and the correct markings.

What isn't legal are "show plates": plates with different fonts, rearranged spacing, patterned backgrounds or tiny motorbike plates. They're made for car shows, not public roads. We get asked for them every week and we turn them down every week.

The two-minute check

Before your MOT, walk round the car and look at both plates:

1. Are they cracked, faded, peeling or discoloured?
2. Are they firmly fixed, front and rear?
3. Is the font the standard one, with nothing moved or squashed?
4. Is there a supplier's name and BS AU 145e marked on each plate?
5. Is the background plain: white at the front, yellow at the back?
6. Does the rear number plate light work?
7. Are they clean enough to read from a distance?

If any answer is no, sort it before the test. It's quicker and cheaper than a fail and a retest. If you want more detail, we've put together the full list of MOT plate checks (https://plateboss.co.uk/number-plates/number-plate-mot-fail/).

If your plates need replacing

You can't simply walk in and order a number plate. A DVLA-registered supplier has to see proof of who you are and proof that you're entitled to that registration, such as your V5C logbook. That rule protects all of us, because it makes it harder for criminals to clone plates.

Not everyone likes it. Last month a customer who had bought a car at auction didn't have the logbook yet, and he refused to leave without his plates. We had to explain several times that as a DVLA-registered supplier we simply can't hand plates over without the right documents. He came back the following week with the paperwork, and we made them on the spot.

Having the right documents with you can save the day. Earlier this year a customer flew back into Heathrow from holiday and found the plates had been stolen from their car, which they'd left at the hotel. They had a

long drive home ahead of them. Luckily the logbook was in the car and they had their ID with them, so we made a new pair in a few minutes and they got home on time.

So keep your logbook somewhere safe, take ID when you go, and use a registered supplier. Your plates are a small part of the car, but they can stop you in your tracks.

HD runs PlateBoss, a family-run, DVLA-registered number plate maker in Hounslow, West London, making road-legal plates since 2019.

Front number plate VW Golf.