

Not sure which OBD2 scanner you need?



Let's fix that in 10 minutes

Hey, I'm Yuri. I've tested over 100 OBD2 scanners, and the #1 question I get is:

"Which scanner should I get?"

I will show you the differences between 8 scanner types and which scanner is right for your needs.

Just read the whole PDF (less than 10 minutes) and you will know exactly which one to buy.

Legal disclaimer: Some of these links are affiliate links I will make a small commission if you buy. This commission is paid by whoever is selling the scanner, and you will not pay more with my link. Usually, my affiliate links even apply an additional discount at certain mentioned shops.

Type 1: Engine code reader



An engine code reader is the most basic form of OBD2 scanner. It doesn't have most features, but it's the easiest one to use.

The simplest OBD2 scanner – no Bluetooth, no app, no battery. Just plug it in and go.

Good for:

- ✓ Reading engine codes
- ✓ Clearing check engine lights
- ✓ Pre-emission testing
- ✓ Basic engine diagnostics (live data)

Not good for:

- ✗ Diagnosing ABS, airbag, or other systems
- ✗ Unlocking hidden features
- ✗ Checking used cars
- ✗ Data logging while driving
- ✗ Service procedures (DPF reset, battery adaptation, etc.)

💡 **Bonus Tip:** Don't overpay. All basic code readers do pretty much the same thing.

Type 3: Multi-system scanner



A multi-system scanner (also called a 4-system scanner) is a step up from the basic code reader. It supports the engine, transmission, ABS, and airbag – and sometimes more.

Some of the better ones even include basic service procedures like oil reset or DPF regen.

Good for:

- ✓ Reading and clearing codes in engine, transmission, ABS, airbag
- ✓ Checking cars before emissions testing
- ✓ Diagnosing issues with live data
- ✓ Running some service features (DPF reset, injector coding, etc.)

Not good for:

- ✗ Full system diagnostics (unless explicitly supported)
- ✗ Unlocking hidden features
- ✗ Checking used cars thoroughly
- ✗ Data logging

💡 **Bonus Tip:** Get one with Wi-Fi updates. Most scanners in this range offer free lifetime updates, but updating via memory card is a hassle.

Type 4: Laptop scanner



Laptop scanners are powerful, especially when paired with brand-specific software. You can often buy a cable and software kit for around \$25 on AliExpress that gives you dealership-level access. (these are clones of dealership software, not OEM programs)

Good for:

- ✓ Using OEM-style software like Techstream (Toyota), FORScan (Ford), or VCDS clones (VW/Audi)
- ✓ Unlocking features and menus specific to your car's brand
- ✓ Full system diagnostics on specific makes

Not good for:

- ✗ Used car checks
- ✗ Service procedures (often flaky or incomplete)
- ✗ Being your "one tool for all jobs"

💡 **Bonus Tip:** Always use a separate laptop. These tools often require you to disable antivirus – don't risk your main machine or personal data.

Type 5: Bluetooth Bi-Directional scanner



This one is my favorite type. It gives you full-system scan power, live data, and pro features – but for a fraction of the price since you use it with your phone. I always keep one in my glovebox.

Good for:

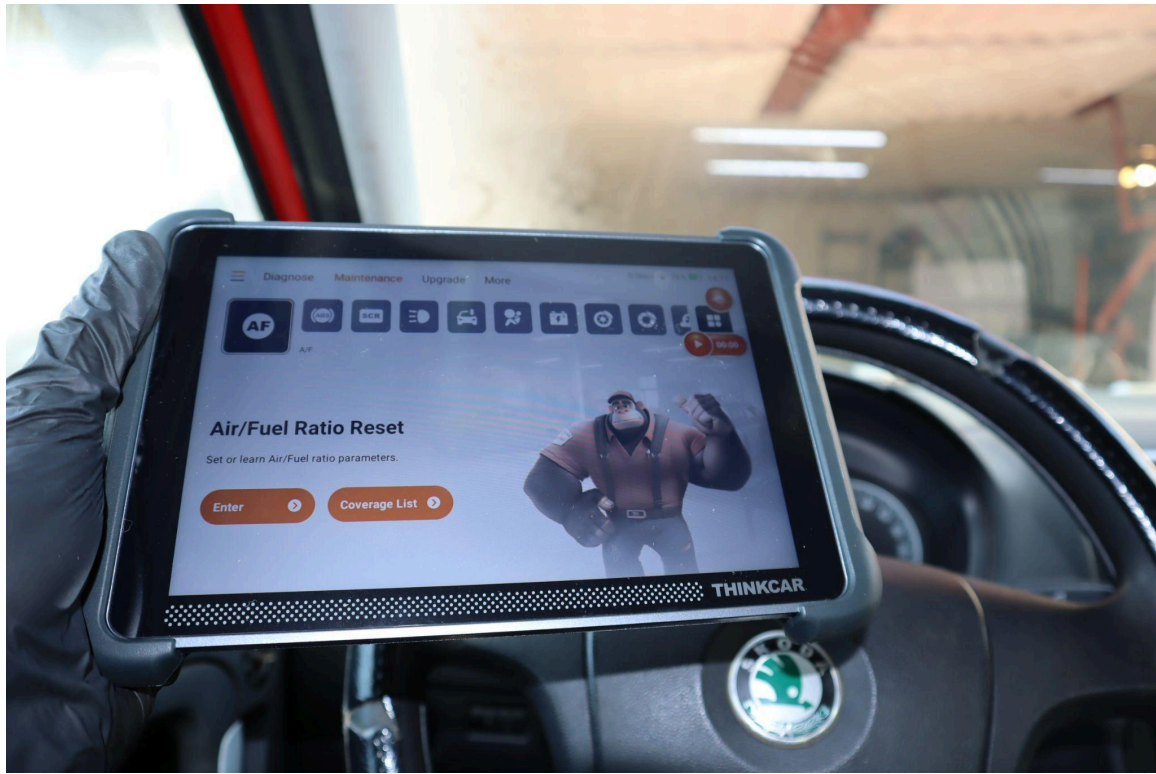
- ✓ Diagnosing problems in all car systems
- ✓ Checking used cars
- ✓ Running service procedures (though fewer than scan tools)
- ✓ Logging live data

Not good for:

- ✗ Using with ELM327 apps (usually locked to their own app)
- ✗ Offline use (most need internet)
- ✗ Long-term use without fees (some require yearly subscription after 1st year)
- ✗ Unlocking hidden features (most don't support ECU coding)

💡 **Bonus Tip:** Get one with free lifetime updates. If you need more functionality, jump straight to a scan tool – it's cheaper in the long run.

Type 6: Bi-directional Scan tool



Scan tools are what pros use – and honestly, there are great ones now starting under \$300. You get fast performance, all systems coverage, deep service options, and no need for a phone or app.

This is what I'd use if I wanted one scanner to do it all.

Good for:

- ✓ Diagnosing every system in any car
- ✓ Checking used cars properly
- ✓ Logging live data
- ✓ Unlocking hidden features and coding
- ✓ Replacing and coding modules
- ✓ Full service procedures (DPF, battery, brake bleeds, etc.)

Not good for:

✗ Really niche stuff that only dealership tools can do – but for 99% of jobs, this is all you need

💡 **Bonus Tip:** I prefer [Mucar or Thinkcar](#). Solid tools with great coverage and official stores usually offer discounts and free updates.

Type 7: One-branded scanner



These can look like anything – a Bluetooth adapter, a scan tool, or a basic code reader – but their power is focused on one car brand.

They work on all cars as an engine code reader, but unlock pro features (full system scan, coding, service procedures) only for one brand.

✓ Good for:

- ✓ Reading/clearing engine codes on all cars
- ✓ Advanced features for one brand (e.g., Toyota, BMW, VW)
- ✓ Saving money if you work on one brand only
- ✓ Free lifetime updates in most cases

✗ Not good for:

- ✗ Full diagnostics or advanced work on other brands
- ✗ Universal scanner needs

💡 **Bonus Tip:** Great value for single-brand garages. \$150 for a tool that does what \$400 universal scanners do – for your brand.

Type 8: Specific scanner



These tools are made for **one specific task**, not general diagnostics. You'll find them dedicated to jobs like programming keys, correcting mileage after cluster swaps, or servicing TPMS systems.


Some may include basic scan tool features, but their real value is in doing that one job really well.

Common examples include:

- ✓ TPMS tools (sensor programming, reset procedures)
- ✓ Odometer correction tools (mileage sync after cluster replacement)
- ✓ Key programmers (add keys, clone transponders, reset immobilizers)
- ✓ Injector coding tools or service-specific devices

Not good for:

- ✗ General diagnostics or scanning codes across systems
- ✗ Viewing live data
- ✗ Full-system troubleshooting

 **Bonus Tip:** Only get one of these if you *need that exact function*. They're not a replacement for a regular scanner – they're for solving one problem fast.

Which scanner to buy then?

Now you know the differences between types, but which scanner should you get? Here are a few real-world examples of choosing the right scanner.

Need to check if a car's mileage was rolled back?

You need a scanner that can access all control modules and compare stored mileage across them.

👉 Recommended: Bluetooth bi-directional scanner or scan tool

[Best OBD2 Scanners for Mileage Check](#)

Maintaining multiple cars in your family?

If you're the go-to "car person" in your household, get a tool that works on all brands and systems.

👉 Recommended: Bi-directional scan tool

[Best OBD2 Scanners Under \\$500](#)

Only work on one brand like Toyota, BMW, or VW?

You can save money by using a brand-specific scanner with advanced features just for your car.

👉 Recommended: One-brand scanner

[List of one-brand scanners](#)

Need to fix ABS, airbag, or transmission faults?

You'll need more than just a basic engine reader – go for something that supports multiple systems.

👉 Recommended: Multi-system scanner or scan tool

[Best OBD2 Scanners with ABS/SRS](#)

Replacing a module and need to code it?

Not every scanner can do this – look for tools with ECU coding support.

👉 Recommended: Scan tool with coding or J2534-based scanner

[Best OBD2 Scanners with ECU Coding](#)

Just want to clear a check engine light and read codes?

You don't need to overthink it. A basic engine code reader will do just fine.

👉 Recommended: Engine code reader

[Best Engine Code Readers](#)

Want to unlock hidden features?

You'll need a scanner with ECU coding or brand-specific options that support feature unlocks.

👉 Recommended: One-brand scanner or ECU coding-capable tool

[Best OBD2 Scanners with ECU Coding](#)

Hate paying subscriptions every year?

Some tools offer free lifetime updates — no extra charges after you buy.

👉 Recommended: Scan tools or Bluetooth scanners with lifetime updates

[Best OBD2 Scanners with Free Lifetime Updates](#)

Buying used cars or flipping vehicles?

You'll want full system access, ability to detect permanent codes, and fast scanning.

👉 Recommended: Bluetooth bi-directional or scan tool

[Best OBD2 Scanners for Mileage Check](#)

Doing oil changes, battery swaps, brake service, or DPF regens?

You need service functions that basic scanners don't offer.

👉 Recommended: Bi-directional scan tool

[Best OBD2 Scanners Under \\$500](#)

How to save money when buying a scanner



Tip #1: Check the price on official stores

This is not always true, but most of the time, the official store will have a better price than general stores like Aliexpress, Amazon, or eBay. Check your scanner on these official shops:

- [Thinkcar/Mucar Shop](#)
- [XTool global shop](#)
- [Autel reseller \(not original, but best prices\)](#)
- [Topdon Europe shop](#)
- [Kingbolen/Launch shop](#)

Tip #2: Buy a scanner with a tablet

Smartphone bi-directional adapters may seem like a great deal (and they are, especially those with free lifetime updates).

But if you need one with more features, like ECU coding, you will have to pay a subscription fee. For example, my favourite Thinkdiag2 has a \$100/year subscription.

In that case, it is better to just buy a \$400 scan tool with the same features and 3 years of free updates. You can still sell it for a good amount of money, unlike a Bluetooth adapter.

[List of my recommended scan tools here.](#)

Tip #3: Use a discount coupon

I have collected several discount coupons for different tools. Check out the [discount coupon page](#) on my website.

I need a specific scanner for this

On my website, I have categorized the best scanner options into different categories

- Best for specific brands (Ford, GM, Toyota, BMW, etc)
- Best on budget (under \$50, under \$100, etc...)
- Best for type (best elm, best scan tool, etc...)
- Best for feature (for used car check, for mileage correction, etc)

[Go to the extended website guide here and choose your category](#)

Want to Actually Use Your Scanner Like a Pro?

Picking the right scanner is step one.

Knowing how to actually use it – how to read live data properly, test components the right way, diagnose real problems, and avoid wasting money on unnecessary repairs – that’s what truly makes the difference.

That’s exactly why I built the [CarHacker Membership](#).

Instead of a single course, you get full access to a growing library of:

- ✓ Step-by-step diagnostic procedures for real vehicles
- ✓ Coding and programming walkthroughs
- ✓ Service reset guides and maintenance functions
- ✓ Used car inspection checklists and strategies
- ✓ Practical training on live data and fault analysis
- ✓ A private member area with continuously added content

Everything is built from real hands-on work – not theory.

 Ready to go beyond basic code reading?

[Join the CarHacker Membership and start using your scanner the way it was meant to be used](#)