

FREE CHECKLIST

Developer Vetting Checklist

20 questions that expose red flags before you sign a contract.

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Free resource — 2026

seattle.dev/downloads/developer-vetting-checklist.pdf

CHECKLIST

Developer Vetting Checklist

Hiring a custom developer (freelancer or agency) is one of the highest-risk purchases a small business makes. The work is invisible until it's done, the failure mode is "we built the wrong thing," and the lock-in is real. These 12 questions expose the red flags before you sign.

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Ask these in the first conversation

Mark ✓ if the answer was satisfying and concrete. Mark △ if it was vague, evasive, or required follow-up to understand.

Question	Verdict
Can you show me 3 projects similar to mine that you built in the last 2 years? Watch for: Red flag if they only have one example or all examples are >5 years old.	✓ / △
Who will actually do the work? Can I meet them? Watch for: Salesperson ≠ developer. If you can't meet the team, you're buying a pitch.	✓ / △
What's your hourly rate and how do you estimate hours? Watch for: Red flag: fixed quotes without a discovery phase. Fixed-bid projects that balloon = change-order hell.	✓ / △
How do you handle scope changes mid-project? Watch for: Should have a written change-order process, not 'we'll figure it out.'	✓ / △
What does your typical communication cadence look like? Watch for: Should be weekly at minimum. If they say 'we'll reach out when there's something to share,' run.	✓ / △
Can I see a recent project's codebase? Watch for: Even a small open-source piece. If they refuse, the code quality is probably worse than the demo.	✓ / △
What happens if the project goes sideways — is there a kill switch? Watch for: Red flag: no answer. Good answer: defined milestones with off-ramps and clear ownership of work-in-progress.	✓ / △
Who owns the code, design files, and infrastructure when we're done? Watch for: Default answer must be: you do. Watch for phrases like 'we host it for you as part of the package.'	✓ / △

What's your testing and QA process before deliverables?



Watch for: Should be specific. 'We test thoroughly' is not an answer.

Can you provide 3 references I can actually call?



Watch for: Not testimonials — actual recent clients willing to talk. If they hesitate, the references are cherry-picked.

What does your maintenance / post-launch support look like?



Watch for: Should have a defined plan with hours, response times, and rate. Not 'we'll be available when you need us.'

How do you handle IP — your work, third-party libraries, and AI-generated code?



Watch for: Should be explicit. AI-assisted code is fine but you need to know what's used and what's licensed how.

Total ✓ (clean answers)

/ 12

Contract clauses to insist on

- | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| ☐ Fixed scope with a clear change-order process | — not "we'll figure it out as we go" | ☐ Milestone-based payments | — never 100% upfront, ideally tied to deliverables not hours |
| ☐ Code ownership transfers at delivery | — written, not implied | ☐ Source code escrow or repository access | — you can pull the code even mid-project |
| ☐ Defined maintenance window post-launch | — what bugs they fix free vs billable | ☐ Termination clause with your data returned | — how you exit cleanly if it goes wrong |
| ☐ NDA / confidentiality | — protects your business info and customer data | ☐ Indemnification for IP infringement | — they're on the hook if their code uses something they shouldn't |

Walk-away signals

In the conversation

- "We've never done anything quite like this, but how hard can it be?"
- Refuses to share examples or references
- Pressure to sign before you finish evaluating
- Trash-talks previous clients
- Vague on timeline ("a few months" without milestones)

In the proposal

- All hourly, no fixed deliverables
- 50%+ payment upfront before any work starts
- Long auto-renewing maintenance contract you can't cancel
- No mention of how your data leaves if you fire them
- "Ownership transfers after final payment" — means they own it until then

SCORING

10+ ✓ and no contract red flags: Solid candidate. Move forward with reference checks.

7–9 ✓: Promising but dig deeper on the ⚠ items before signing.

<7 ✓ or any contract red flag: Walk away. There are other developers.

WANT HELP VETTING A DEVELOPER YOU'RE CONSIDERING?

If you're evaluating a developer or agency and want a second opinion on their proposal or answers, I do free 30-minute sanity-check sessions. Send the proposal ahead of time and we'll go through the red flags together.

seattle.dev/schedule-consultation