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Spotting Counterfeit Coins with Online Tools

Free online tools and simple home checks to screen for fakes before you buy

Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

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THE 60-SECOND VERSION

1 The 60-Second Version

The whole idea, if you only have a minute.

You can screen most counterfeit coins with things you already own: a small scale, a ruler, a magnet, and the phone in your pocket. A real coin has a known weight and size; a fake usually misses on at least one. Silver and gold are not magnetic, so a magnet that grabs a 'silver' coin has told you everything you need. And if a coin is in a sealed grading-company holder, you can look up its certification number for free online in seconds.

- The home checks: weight, diameter, and a magnet catch a large share of the crude fakes before you ever pay.
- The online checks: the PCGS and NGC websites and apps let you verify a certification number and compare against their photos, at no cost.
- The honest limit: these steps screen out the obvious problems. They do not replace a professional's judgment on a coin that is valuable or in doubt.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Think of this as a smoke detector, not a vault. The goal is to catch trouble early and cheaply, and to know the moment a coin is worth paying an expert to examine. Most of the time, a few minutes of checking is all it takes to walk away from a bad deal with your money intact.

WHY IT MATTERS

2 Why Counterfeits Are Worth Knowing About

The problem, in plain terms.

Counterfeit coins are more common than they used to be, and some of the newer ones look convincing in a photo. They turn up in online listings, at some shows, and in boxes of coins passed down or bought in bulk. The good news is that most fakes are not very good once you get past the picture, and the simple checks in this guide catch a great many of them.

You do not have to become an expert. You only have to be a careful, unhurried buyer with a short routine. Sellers who are honest will not mind your questions, and sellers who are not honest count on you being in a hurry.

> *The fakes aren't aimed at the experts. They're aimed at the friendly buyer who's a little rushed and a little trusting. Slowing down is most of the defense right there.*

YOUR PHONE IS THE TOOL

3 What Your Phone and a Few Free Tools Can Do

You already own most of the kit.

Before we get into any one check, here is the whole toolkit. None of it is expensive, and the online parts are free.

- A small digital scale that reads to a tenth of a gram. Inexpensive kitchen or jewelry scales work fine.
- A ruler or caliper that measures in millimeters, for diameter.
- A magnet. A strong little one is ideal, but any household magnet is a useful start.
- Your phone's camera and web browser, for comparing photos and looking up certification numbers.
- Two free apps if you want them: the grading companies offer apps for looking coins up, covered later in this guide.

GOOD TO KNOW

Everything online in this guide is free to use. You do not need a paid subscription to verify a certification number or to view the grading companies' reference photos. Be wary of any app or site that charges a fee just to tell you whether a coin is real.

THE THREE HOME CHECKS

4 Weight, Diameter, and the Magnet Test

Physical checks a fake struggles to pass.

Every genuine coin was made to a published standard for weight, diameter, and metal. Counterfeiters often cannot match all three at once, because the right metal costs money and the wrong metal weighs the wrong amount. So the simplest, most powerful check you can do at home is to measure the coin and compare it to the known specification for that exact coin.

Weight and diameter

Look up the official weight and diameter for the coin and date you are checking, then measure. A genuine coin can vary a hair from wear, but a fake is often off by enough to notice. As one common example, a classic U.S. Morgan silver dollar was struck at about 26.73 grams and 38.1 millimeters across, in 90 percent silver. If a coin that is supposed to be a Morgan weighs 24 grams, something is wrong.

Coin	Weight	Diameter
Morgan dollar	26.73 g	38.1 mm
Look up yours	See the specs	See the specs

The magnet test

Silver and gold are not magnetic. Neither is the copper-nickel in modern U.S. coins. So if you hold a magnet near a coin that is supposed to be silver or gold and the coin jumps to it or sticks, that coin is not what it claims to be. This single test catches many cheap fakes made with iron or steel.

WATCH OUT

Passing the magnet test does not prove a coin is real. Some counterfeits use non-magnetic base metals and will ignore a magnet just like genuine silver. The magnet is a quick way to catch obvious fakes, not a seal of approval.

TIP

Write the published weight and diameter on a slip of paper before you measure, so you are comparing to the real number and not to what you hope to see. The grading companies' reference pages list these specs for most coins.

Rather not do this yourself? I'll come to your home and set it up for you — a flat $99 first visit across Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities. Outside the area? I also help remotely by phone or screen-share. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042.

KNOWING THE REAL THING

5 Comparing Against Reference Images

A trusted picture is a powerful yardstick.

Many fakes fall apart the moment you set them beside a clear, trusted photo of the genuine coin. Letters are slightly the wrong shape, the date looks mushy, the design is soft where it should be crisp, or the reverse does not quite match the front. Your phone makes this easy: pull up a reference image, zoom in, and compare feature by feature.

Where to find trusted images

- The grading companies publish large free photo references of genuine coins, covered in the next two chapters.
- The U.S. Mint and reputable dealer and auction sites show clear photos of authentic examples.
- For a coin in a seller's listing, ask for the actual coin's photos rather than a stock image, so you compare the real item.

What to look at

- The lettering and numbers: sharp and evenly spaced on a genuine coin, often soft or crowded on a fake.
- The date: counterfeiters frequently stumble on the date's shape.

- The surface: genuine surfaces are clean; some fakes show tiny lumps, pits, or a grainy, pebbled texture.
- The reverse: confirm the back matches the correct design for that date, not a mismatched one.

> *Half the time you don't need to know why a coin looks wrong. Put it next to a good photo and your own eye tells you something's off. Trust that feeling and slow down.*

THE PCGS TOOLS

6 The PCGS Cert Verification and CoinFacts Apps

Free lookups from one of the big grading companies.

PCGS is one of the two large coin-grading companies in the United States. When they grade a coin, they seal it in a plastic holder with a label and a unique certification number. That number lets anyone confirm, for free, what PCGS actually graded. PCGS offers this through its website and two free phone apps.

Verifying a certification number

1. Open the PCGS Cert Verification app, or go to the cert lookup page on the PCGS website.
2. Scan the barcode or QR code on the holder with your phone, or type in the certification number by hand.
3. Read what comes back: the coin, its grade, the holder type, and how many PCGS has graded.
4. Compare that record to the coin in front of you. The coin, label, and grade should all match.

The second app, PCGS CoinFacts, is a free reference library for U.S. coins. It includes values, how many of each coin have been graded, and high-resolution photos you can use to compare against a coin you are checking.

GOOD TO KNOW

Newer PCGS holders support a tap-to-verify feature using the chip-reading ability built into many phones, in addition to the barcode. Either way, the point is the same: the number on the holder should lead to a record that matches the coin.

THE NGC TOOLS

7 The NGC Verify Tool and App

The other major grading company's free check.

NGC is the other large U.S. grading company, and it works much the same way: a sealed holder, a label, and a unique certification number you can verify at no cost. NGC offers this through its website and the NGC app, available any time of day.

Verifying an NGC coin

1. Open the NGC Verify tool on the NGC website, or use the NGC app.
2. Enter the certification number and the grade from the label, or scan the barcode on the holder with the app.
3. Review the coin description and grade NGC has on file.
4. Compare NGC's own photo of that coin, where available, to the coin you are looking at. Label, holder, and coin should all agree.

NGC has photographed millions of the coins it has certified and makes those images free to view. That means for many coins you can see the exact graded coin, not just a stand-in, which is a strong check against a swapped or faked holder.

WATCH OUT

An NGC lookup can show an alert such as a possible counterfeit-holder warning when NGC knows a number has been copied onto a fake holder. If you see any warning, stop and do not buy until it is cleared up.

READING A LOOKUP

8 What a Verification Page Tells You, and What It Doesn't

The lookup is a check, not a guarantee.

A certification lookup is one of the best free tools you have, but it is important to understand exactly what it proves. It confirms that a number matches a record in the grading company's database. It does not, by itself, prove that the coin in the seller's photos is the one that goes with that number.

The swapped-photo trap

A dishonest seller can take a real certification number, look up its grade and value, and attach that number to a different coin or a counterfeit holder. The database entry will look perfect because the number is real. That is why you compare the grading company's own photo to the actual coin, and why you ask the seller for the barcode of the specific coin you are buying rather than a stock image.

- A match confirms the number is genuine. It does not confirm the coin in hand is the one tied to it.
- No match can mean a mistyped number, a very old holder, or a fake. Re-check your typing before assuming the worst.
- A warning alert means stop until it is resolved.
- On rare occasions a database entry itself can contain an error; if details look wrong, contact the grading company.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> The strongest free check is a matching photo from the grading company. When the company shows the exact coin for that number and it matches the seller's actual pictures, you have confirmed both the number and the coin together.

CHECKING THE PHOTOS

9 Reverse Image Search on a Seller's Pictures

Finding out where a photo really came from.

A reverse image search takes a picture and finds other places that same picture appears online. For coin buying, this is a quick way to catch a seller who has grabbed someone else's photo, used a stock image instead of the real coin, or recycled a picture from an old auction of a different item.

How to do it from your phone

1. Save or screenshot the seller's photo of the coin.
2. Open a reverse image search tool, such as the one built into your phone's camera or browser, or a site like TinEye.
3. Upload the photo and look at where else it appears online.
4. Ask yourself whether the matches make sense: the same photo on many unrelated listings is a warning sign.

WATCH OUT

Reverse image search tells you where a photo has been, not whether a coin is real. A fake can be photographed fresh and show no matches at all. Treat this as one clue among several, especially for catching reused or stolen pictures.

TIP

If a listing's photo shows up on a dozen unrelated sellers, or traces back to a general stock-photo site, ask the seller to send fresh pictures of the actual coin, including the holder and its barcode. An honest seller can do this easily.

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MARKETPLACE RED FLAGS

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Red Flags on Online Marketplaces

The warning signs that save you money.

Most bad deals give themselves away before you ever examine the coin, if you know what to watch for. None of these alone proves a fake, but several together should make you walk away.

Red flag	Why it worries me
Price too good	Real coins rarely sell far below value
Stock photo only	You cannot see the actual coin
Vague seller	No history, no clear answers
Rushed sale	Pressure to buy fast, now
Ships from afar	Harder to return, trace, or dispute

The single most useful habit is to insist on seeing clear photos of the actual coin, and for a graded coin, the holder and its certification number. A seller who will not show you the specific coin is telling you something.

- Be extra careful with bulk lots and 'estate find' listings, where fakes are easily mixed in.
- Favor sellers with a track record and clear return policies.
- Use payment methods that let you dispute a charge if the coin arrives wrong.
- If a deal feels off, it costs nothing to pass and wait for the next one.

> *I've never once regretted walking away from a coin. The deals that pressure you to decide this second are the ones built to keep you from thinking it through.*

A SAFE ROUTINE

11 A Safe Buying Routine, Step by Step

The same short checklist, every time.

Here is the routine I would use before buying any coin that costs enough to matter. It takes a few minutes and becomes second nature quickly.

1. Ask for clear photos of the actual coin, both sides, and for a graded coin the holder and its certification number.
2. Run a reverse image search on the photos to catch reused or stock pictures.
3. If there is a certification number, verify it free on the PCGS or NGC site or app, and compare their photo to the seller's.
4. If the coin is in hand, weigh it, measure the diameter, and try a magnet against the published specs.
5. Compare the coin to a trusted reference image, feature by feature.
6. Only pay once everything lines up, using a method you can dispute if needed.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> If any step comes back wrong or you simply cannot tell, that is not a failure. It is the system working. Pass on the coin, or move on to the next chapter and consider professional authentication before you commit.

WHEN TO GET A PRO

12 When to Get Professional Authentication

Knowing the edge of your own checks.

The home and online checks in this guide are made to screen out the obvious problems cheaply. They are not a substitute for a professional on a coin that is valuable, unusual, or simply one you cannot settle in your own mind. Knowing when to hand a coin to an expert is part of being a careful collector, not a sign you lack skill.

Signs it is time for a pro

- The coin is worth enough that a mistake would really hurt.

- It is a date or type known to be faked, or a key rarity.
- Something looks off and your checks cannot explain it.
- You are buying raw, un-graded, and plan to keep it for the long run.

The grading companies themselves authenticate and grade coins for a fee, and a trusted local dealer can often give you a read or point you to the right service. For a coin of real value, that fee is cheap insurance against a costly fake.

> **TIP**
>
> Sending a coin to be graded and sealed does two things at once: it confirms the coin is genuine, and it gives you a holder with a certification number that makes the coin easier to sell or pass down later.

COMMON QUESTIONS

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Common Questions

The things people ask me most.

Does a magnet test prove a coin is real?

No. It is a quick way to catch cheap iron or steel fakes, because real silver and gold are not magnetic. But a fake can be made from a non-magnetic metal and pass the test, so a 'no stick' result means keep checking, not 'all clear.'

Is it safe to trust a certification number I look up?

Trust it to confirm the number is real and what grade goes with it. Do not assume the coin in the photos is the one tied to that number. Compare the grading company's own picture, and ask for the specific coin's barcode.

Are the grading-company apps free?

Yes. The PCGS and NGC verification tools and reference photos are free to use on their websites and apps. Sending a coin in to be graded costs money, but looking up a number does not.

Can my phone just tell me if a coin is fake?

Not reliably. Apps can look up numbers and show you reference photos, which is a big help, but no phone app authenticates a coin for you. The checks in this guide, together, are far more trustworthy than any single scan.

GOOD TO KNOW

If you are ever unsure, the safest answer is to slow down. A genuine coin will still be for sale after you have done your checks, and a seller worth buying from will wait for you to be comfortable.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

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Putting It All Together

A calm, repeatable habit beats worry.

You do not need to fear counterfeits. You need a short routine and the patience to use it. Measure and weigh, try a magnet, compare against a trusted photo, verify any certification number for free, check the seller's pictures, and get a pro involved when the coin is valuable or in doubt. Done in order, those steps catch the vast majority of the fakes an everyday collector will ever meet.

None of this is about becoming an expert overnight. It is about being a thoughtful, unhurried buyer who asks fair questions and knows the limits of a quick check. That alone puts you well ahead of the buyers these fakes are designed to catch.

GOOD TO KNOW

If you would like a hand getting set up, I am glad to help you pick a simple scale and magnet, install the free verification apps on your phone, walk through a cert lookup together, and practice the routine on a coin or two, so screening a purchase feels like a calm, familiar habit rather than a worry.

> *The hobby is supposed to be a pleasure, not a nerve-racking gamble. A little routine takes the fear out of it and lets you enjoy the coins, which is the whole point.*

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this page handy. It points you straight to what to do for each task.

I want to...	Do this...
Weigh and measure it	Use a small scale and ruler, compare to the published specs
Try the magnet	A genuine silver or gold coin will not stick to a magnet
Compare the picture	Hold it beside a known-good reference photo on your phone
Check a cert number	Look it up free on the PCGS or NGC verification site or app
Check the seller's photos	Run a reverse image search to catch reused stock photos
Know when to stop	For anything valuable or uncertain, get professional authentication
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042

AT A GLANCE

A Picture to Follow Along

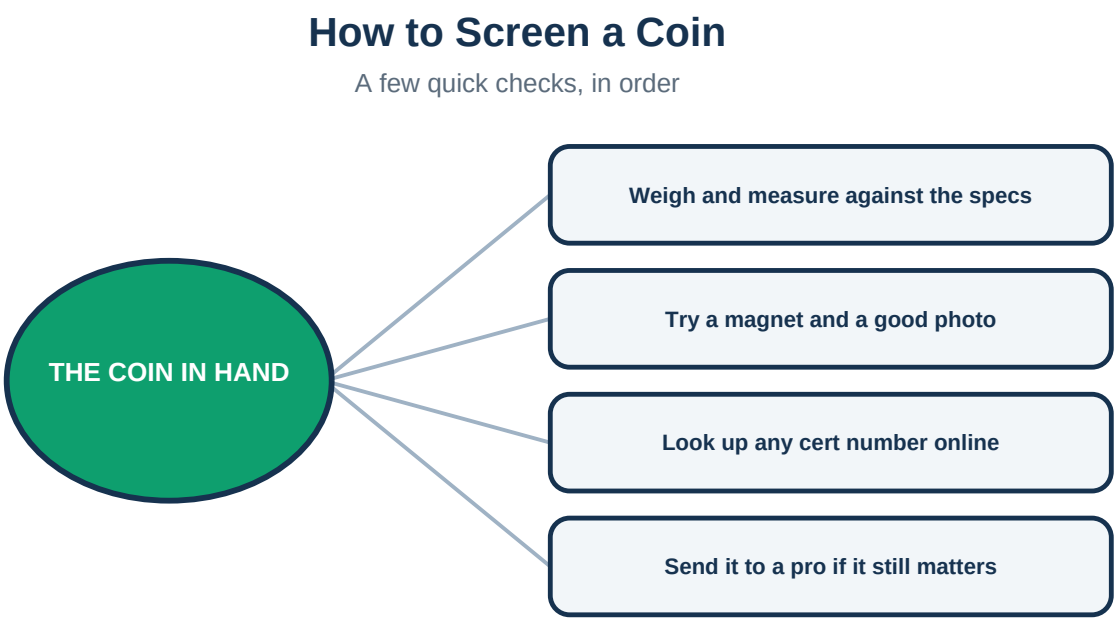


Illustration — a schematic. Set-up screens differ; each takes only a few minutes.

AT A GLANCE

A Second Look

Checking Before You Buy

A calm routine, every time

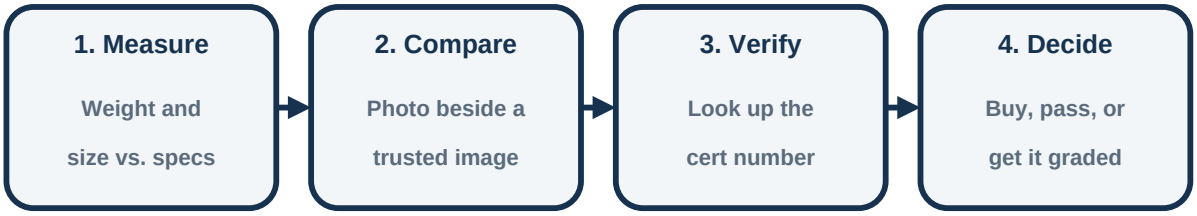


Illustration — a schematic. The order is a suggestion; do one box at a time.

A schematic of the plan — company steps vary; the order does not have to.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

You don't have to remember all of it — just that a friendly, patient person is one call away, whenever you'd rather have a hand.

KEY SPECS

In your home — $99 flat for the first visit, no contracts and no surprises, with a 30-day come-back-free follow-up. In-home visits cover Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities.
Outside the area? Remotely — $49 for a screen-share session (free for Support Plan members, $39/mo), refundable if I can't fix it — and credited toward a visit if you'd rather have me in person. Book either at billshometech.com/book.

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

Whenever you're ready, I'll come to your home anywhere in Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities, at your pace. Too far for a house call? I also help remotely. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042. — Bill

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