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Amanda Manning hacking away
photo by Taylor Robinson

mechanics tend to be condescending and may not give you credit for being able to understand your own car. As a result, you may feel you've paid for something you didn't need or the real problem hasn't even been addressed and continues.

"...many mechanics tend to be condescending and may not give you credit for being able to understand your own car."

PERHAPS WE CAN HELP...

In spite of the plush interior, heated side mirrors, computers, emissions system, electronic gadgetry, entertainment system, spinners, alarms and everything else loaded on our cars these days, the basic engine is still the same. A long time ago an engineer-friend told me something I'll never forget. He said, "Many people think smart engineers design complicated things. However, the best engineers design things that are simple and have few moving parts. The simpler the better." This is true of the automobile engine – the basic concept hasn't changed for 100+ years.

Knowing this, determine NOT to be intimidated and cultivate a desire to learn and understand your car, at least to the point that you know basically what needs to be repaired, what has been repaired and why.

BASIC (BUT IMPORTANT) THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR AUTOMOBILE ENGINE

Your engine needs five things to start and remain running: 1) Fuel to

Car Care 101

By Chris Johnson

LADIES! YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF YOUR CAR!

"May I help you?"
 "Yes. I need to have someone look at my Suburban."
 "What seems to be the trouble, M'am?"
 "I noticed a strange noise last week while I was driving to work and I need to have someone check it out."
 "What sort of noise?"
 "Well, I'm not sure how to describe it. It was like a 'clunk, clunk, clunk.'"

"I see. So, was it more of a dull, thumping sound or was it a sharper sound, like metal on metal?"

LATER THAT DAY...

"May I help you?"
 "Yes. I'm here to pick up my Suburban. You were to figure out what the thumping noise was and repair it."
 "OK. Let me get the paper work."
 "I am curious to see what you found."
 "M'am, the notes say our mechanic drove your Suburban all around town and didn't hear anything."
 Sound familiar? Chances are great, this has happened to you. If it hasn't, beware. Your turn will come. And, to exacerbate the situation, many



Amanda attempts to drain the oil...

photo by Taylor Robinson

burn/expand to push the parts of your engine; 2) A well-timed spark to ignite the fuel; 3) Air to mix with the fuel so that it burns evenly; 4) Oil to lubricate the moving parts, and 5) Coolant to circulate through the engine to keep it cool. Trust me, if you're missing one of these components, you're not going to get very far and may even ruin your engine forever.

While this may already be more than you ever wanted to know, this information can prove to be helpful. If your car doesn't start or if it runs rough, review these essentials in your mind...

1. Is the starter making the engine try to run when you turn the key? (If not, then you've narrowed your problem to something electrical, most likely your battery, your alternator (which charges your battery and keeps it strong) or a bad connection among the starting components. If your engine is trying to start ("turning over"), then you're either not getting any spark or the spark you are getting is not

occurring at the right time.

2. Do you have fuel? (If not, then get some!) Is it getting to the engine? (If not, then maybe you have a bad fuel pump or a dirty fuel filter).
3. Is there anything restricting the flow of air to the engine? Is a hose kinked or is your air filter so dirty that it won't allow enough air through it for the engine to run smoothly?
4. Do you have the minimum amount of oil? Let's put it this way, if you have the appropriate amount of oil, you'll be fine. If not, you will destroy your engine. It's remotely possible that oil is not being pumped to your engine, but this is extremely rare. Your oil light would indicate such a problem.
5. Do you have the minimum amount of coolant? Most engines today are "liquid cooled," meaning, liquid is circulated throughout the engine by a water pump and cooled through your radiator. If you don't have enough coolant or your water pump is bad, your engine will over

heat. Note: Never add coolant to a hot engine. Wait for it to cool, locate and repair the leak, then add the appropriate amount of coolant.

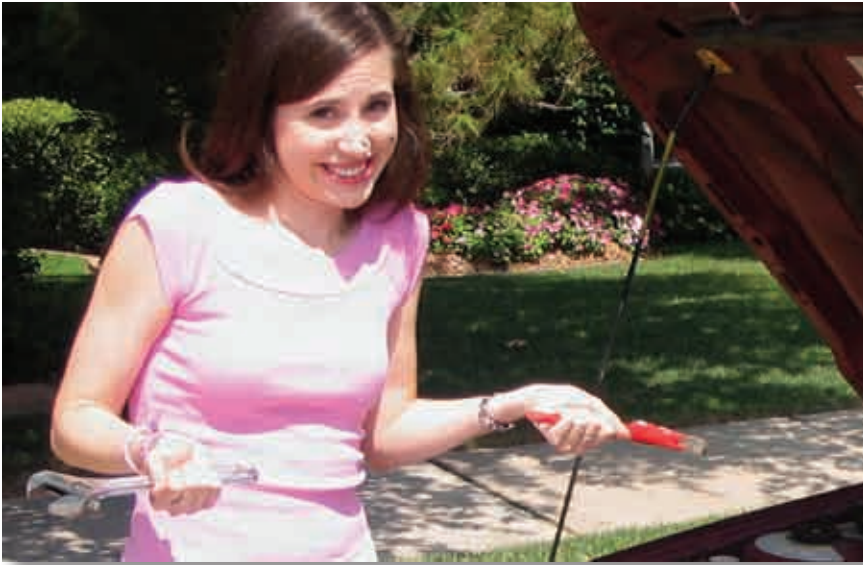
"While this may already be more than you ever wanted to know, this information can prove to be helpful."

ESSENTIAL ENGINE CARE

1. Never start or drive without oil. Truly, it's easy to check. Pull the dipstick out (usually identified by a yellow or orange plastic ring) and make sure the oil is above the bottom line ("minimum"). Change your oil and oil filter regularly. Most oil change shops recommend every 3,000 miles. Though this is frequent given manufacturers' recommendations, it can only help your engine last longer.
2. Change your air filter regularly. Living around Frisco with all the dust from construction, I change mine every 10,000 miles, if not more frequently.
3. When your Check Engine light comes on, get it checked out. Some local parts stores, like AutoZone, will plug in their code reader and tell you why the light is illuminated. And, they do it for free. I did this last year and simply had to replace a sensor. It was a quick \$40 fix. The Check Engine light does not need to result in a \$1,200 repair bill.

OTHER BASIC MAINTENANCE AND TIPS

1. Your tires play an important role in the safety of your vehicle. Due to wear, they should be rotated to make sure the wear is distributed evenly. Let's face it, tires are expensive...so, rotate them!



Help!
photo by Taylor Robinson

You can't really rotate tires too much, however it should be done at regular mileage intervals, say every 5,000 miles. And, minivans in particular, need regular, frequent tire rotation. Also, make sure your tires are properly inflated. The shop you select to rotate your tires should also check your tire pressure.

2. Pay attention to the wheel alignment of your car. Are you constantly directing the steering wheel to the left or right because, if ignored, you would either go toward the ditch or hit oncoming traffic? Your car is supposed to go fairly straight on it's own. A bad alignment can make driving laborious, prematurely wear

out your tires and even affect the safety of your vehicle.

3. When you hear a noise, try to determine when, where and under what conditions you hear it. Are you always moving? Is it coming from the front of the car, or the rear? Is it always on that bumpy road? This will greatly help your mechanic identify the problem.

While you won't be able to repair your own automobile with this information, knowing some basics can help you understand and appreciate what's going on under your hood. You may even be able to make sense/cents of what your mechanic is telling you (or not telling you) about that "clunk" you're hearing.

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