

National Bankruptcy Archives Oral History Project

"Cheat Sheet" for Interviewers

Prepared by Jordon Steele
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Below is a condensed version of the guide prepared for individuals interested in conducting oral history. If you do nothing else, consider the following advice.

During the Interview

****Make sure you obtain a signed copy of the release form. The recording can't be used without it!**

Perform a check of the equipment before you begin the formal interview.

Start the interview with a brief statement of the full name of the interviewee, your name, and the location and date of the interview.

Don't ask "yes" or "no" questions. Instead, ask questions that invite a narrative answer.

Refrain from asking leading questions that presume an answer. For example, don't ask "Did you feel that the Supreme Court was hostile to bankruptcy judicial reform efforts" but rather "What was the reaction of the Supreme Court to bankruptcy judicial reform?"

Ask one question at a time.

Start with "easy" questions about the interviewee's own experience and background. Save the philosophical questions and questions about controversial issues until later, after you have developed a rapport and a flow.

Don't be worried by silences, and don't rush to fill them yourself. If you have asked a question and the interviewee doesn't jump in with an answer immediately, wait for him/her to start.

Remember to ask not only the straightforward factual questions (who, what, and where) but the more probing ones (how and why). Ask about feelings and opinions.

Refrain from arguing with the interviewee, or challenging statements that he/she makes.

Don't turn off the taping until the end, unless the interviewee requests it be turned off for a time or there is an interruption in the conversation (e.g., a phone call that must be answered).

Try not to cut off or talk over the interviewee.

After the interview has concluded, take the time to thank your subject and chat about the process. Leave the recording equipment running during this time, because sometimes post-interview conversation leads to more stories!

In the end, however, remember that this is a conversation. So relax and enjoy the experience!

After the interview

Please send the signed consent form of the interviewer and interviewee, and the Digital Video cassette tape or digital file and to the following address:

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