Archival texts are the foundation of social and economic history. In spite of differences in media and in times and places of composition, all archival texts preserve details that help identify individuals taking part in activities at specific times and places, and who act in relationships with persons who may or may not be family.

Prosopographers mine archival texts for:
- personal names
- family & social relationships
- dates and activities
- toponyms

Complex naming patterns, limited onomastic inventory, and damage to original sources challenge experienced and novice researchers’ efforts to disambiguate namesakes: repeated, not always identical, names. Databases help with organizing data, but domain expertise is necessary to assess the value of each datum in what is often an imprecise process that leads to a declaration that 2+ name instances identify a single person: the expert uses criteria appropriate to the corpus — e.g., “how likely are name instances in texts separated by 45 years to refer to the same individual?” Recovery of new evidence, reassessment of old evidence, and differences of scholarly opinion complicate what is essentially a process of probabilistic reasoning.

Researchers internalize the rules specific to disambiguating namesakes in their corpora; they become so proficient that the process seems intuitive. While they sense the degree to which variability in the parameters of inquiry may support investigation of “what if” scenarios in the data, they may be reluctant to explore alternative research directions because of the complexity of manual disambiguation. Subsequent researchers may avoid new interpretations because data and outcomes appear in traditional print publications, and would essentially require full re-working of the analytic process.