Taking an Essay Exam

Here are four basic steps to taking an essay exam and succeeding:
1. Read the question carefully.
2. Rephrase the question as a sentence that states the main idea of your answer. This would be a kind of thesis statement or topic sentence.
3. Make a quick outline of the points you want to cover.
4. Write your essay.

Here is an example of an analytical essay-exam question and a plan to answer it:

Exam question:
Write an essay in which you analyze three major causes of the American Civil War.

Student thesis statement:
Three major causes of the American Civil War are _____, _____, and_____.

Quick outline:
Paragraph 1: Very brief intro that ends with thesis
Paragraph 2: First cause of American Civil War
Paragraph 3: Second cause of American Civil War
Paragraph 4: Third cause of American Civil War
Paragraph 5: Very brief conclusion

Here is an example of a comparison-contrast essay-exam question and a plan to answer it:

Exam question:
Write an essay that compares and contrasts Creationism and Darwinism.

Student thesis statement:
Although Creationism and Darwinism share a few basic similarities, the differences between the two theories are far more profound.

Quick outline:
Paragraph 1: Very brief intro that ends with thesis
Paragraph 2: Similarities between Creationism and Darwinism
   (This may take more than one paragraph.)
Paragraph 3: Differences between Creationism and Darwinism
   (This may take more than one paragraph.)
Paragraph 4: Very brief conclusion